

How to lead your team in the face of adversity.

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What do you do when the market is uncooperative with your growth strategies? How do you deal with unmet performance objectives? How do you manage a cohesionless team? How do you curb attrition and low morale? Has the recent economic downturn undermined confidence in your company's leadership? As counter-intuitive as it may seem, leadership training may be the answer.

When the business climate gets tough, many companies fail because managers try to shoulder all of the leadership responsibilities on their own. They are too busy trying to "take care of their employees" to harness the leadership potential in each of them, that when combined, have the power to turn their company around.

Ask anyone who has led a failed company and see if their story resembles a captain who tried, single-handedly, to save a sinking ship, and then, nobly, went down with it. Talk with someone who successfully turned a company around, and see if their story is one of a captain and crew who pulled together, masterfully navigating a storm into calmer seas. The idea is to inculcate the right sense of ownership, or corps d'esprit amongst all the stakeholders.

If you want your people to become leaders, have them do what leaders do. Approach their development like you would your own. You will find yourself surrounded by peers who can co-lead, instead of overly dependent employees. Some may refer to it as empowerment, or the entrepreneurial spirit, or even the "intrepreneurial" spirit. I call it the "warrior" spirit. The warrior model refers to the shift from the defensive-victim role to taking ownership of one's contributing role, even when the process or system is not working.

Leadership qualities are revealed when we are challenged and our organizations are under duress. Transforming failure into success is what we want to develop and prepare our people for. It is both an inward and an outward process, dealing with attributes of both character and decisive action.

I define this as the distinction between doing and being. Doing consists of the actions that lead to results. Being is the inner substance that informs us and communicates that we have the ability to succeed. To have a sustained impact, your leadership program should key in on both of these areas of tangible skill and intangible quality development.

Building a team

Ask yourself this question about everyone of your people, "If he or she were to run this company today, what would I like them to know and understand? What qualities and skills would I like them to have in order for this company to continue to succeed?" The answer to this question should guide your leadership development process.

Here are six steps to transforming obstacles into opportunities and will get your team started on the path to shared leadership (professional facilitation is strongly recommended):

1. Face your worst fears. You will want to confront the good, the bad and the ugly. The great thing about problems is that they point directly at the solutions. All of your people's complaints, concerns and dissatisfactions are the key indicators for improving your organization and meeting its challenges head on. The danger is in surfacing these concerns unprofessionally, or not being prepared to convert recognized internal problems into action steps.

If problems are aired in the wrong way it can be regressive. When properly guided and facilitated, it can take a fragmented group of a mal-contented and turn them around into a high performing team.

Tip for the manager: Take note of everything your training consultant does. If he or she does his or her job right, and you pay attention, eventually you will be able to conduct your own organizational intervention. That is a transition point of moving from a manager to a true leader. Leading people when faced with a crisis, and not just crisis managing, is when you shift from a task driver to a change agent.

2. Involve everyone. Those who are closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. Whether it is a question of why your customers are not buying or why a process is bottlenecked, it is very likely that your people have the answer. The important thing to do is to create the right context where these solutions can freely come forth, and make them actionable for effective implementation.

Involving everyone is the vital step in creating a culture of leaders. Creating a culture of leaders is a process that yields deep and lasting rewards. We are talking about building a company of people who genuinely believe it is their company, their customers, their waste or efficient use of resources - a company where their ideas for meeting daunting market or economic challenges can be heard. When this happens, your people are more likely to throw themselves into the work when things have to be scaled back because as owners, no one minds putting a little skin in the game.

The strategies for involving everyone in a process like this vary from company to company. Every organization is different. The bigger the company, the more important it is to determine the levels and type of involvement that will work best.

3. Develop your people. The personal and professional development of your people is the key to building a highly successful company with a competitive advantage. Focusing only on monthly quotas and sales goals is shortsighted and can lead to a death spiral in the long run. Performance metrics and business results are vital, but without a holistic, comprehensive view, are difficult to sustain over time.

Some training and development approaches may seem non-job related and therefore summarily dismissed. Think about your people, not only in terms of skills, but also in terms of a caliber. The other benefit is to you as a manager. The more you develop your people, the more you are free to perform at the next level. This is a built-in succession

plan. How many highly qualified managers were passed-up for promotion because they were indispensable at their post. Or entrepreneurs who felt they could never take a vacation or build the next branch or outlet, because, "who could they leave in charge?"

4. Re-invigorate your company's mission statement. This is a huge rallying point. Asking the questions: Who are we? What do we do? Why do we do it and for whom do we do it? That is what your mission statement should be clear about. This exercise serves to include everyone in an "executive" process, which builds a great sense of belonging and ownership. It also communicates the company's reason for being in a way that everyone is fully connected to. It also improves the corporate identity and purpose, which strengthens the culture.

You can extend this exercise to include: Who are our customers? And, how well are we serving them? If your answer does not include each other, your internal customers, you may need to re-assess the line of sight you have to your customers from a marketing, service quality, support and sales perspective.

5. Conduct values based learning sessions. This may sound a little light, but what kind of problems are our major corporations having currently? Yeah. A crisis of values. In a down or less vigorous economy, financial gain as the cornerstone of achievement is not sustainable. For what are we rewarded, recognized, and valued? Our companies, and our society is due for a quiet revolution on the meaning of affluence. In all of the values based, team-building sessions I have conducted, on three continents, less than 5 percent of participants have identified wealth-attainment as their core value.

How well are we doing at integrating our people's values into the values that guide our company's principles. Since a company's values link its mission to its vision, this is very important work. To make this kind of training really effective, you have to have a passion for your people's personal goals, a hand on the pulse of both the tangible and intangible determinates of the team's success, and the capacity to listen-in to the themes and the critical cross-sections of the principles expressed. What comes out of this is the company's guiding principles - the statement of conduct that everyone agrees upon, signs-off on and commits to. The beauty of this is the ability to hold each other accountable for behaviors that compromise or violate these principles.

6. Live into your vision. Living into your vision is about courage. It is about entrepreneurial risk. It is what leaders live for (when they are not busy managing). When your team is lagging, it doesn't hurt to pull a Vince Lombardi or a General Patton, which is to say that you have to get very clear and pumped-up about your vision and infect everyone with your passion for it. Everything from the team retreats, the staff meetings, the daily conversations, and your moment-to-moment behaviors must communicate your commitment to the vision. You must emanate your passion for the vision.

Your vision should clearly communicate the ideal, desired future of your company, the levels of service for which you will be known, and to which future service levels, and even your competitors will be measured by. Your company's vision is about standing in an impossible future. John Kotter, Harvard Business School professor, says a vision is a B.H.A.G., a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. It should be so audacious as to elicit an audible

gasp. Does your company vision statement make you gasp, shudder, or laugh? Or do you have even have a clear vision. And if so, is it known and aspired to by all?

The biggest error in creating a vision statement is in confusing it with a mission statement. A mission statement defines a current reality - a statement of purpose. A vision statement seeks to declare a desired future, based on a company's mission and values. Kotter also states that the vision must be supported by a vivid description of how it will be carried out. It cannot merely be, as W. Edward Demming puts it, a slogan or exhortation. I would like to note that a good mantra or war cry can be helpful if it accurately reflects the spirit of the company's mission and vision.

Finally, the most valuable step in resolving a morale or business performance problem is in accurately identifying the root causes. A quick summary assessment of the situation may lead you right back to the same place you started, but with the new, inherited problems of a failed attempt at resolution. The discipline of organizational development will guide you in conducting a thorough, comprehensive assessment of the existing challenges so you can launch a successful intervention. Let me know how it works out.

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