

What are some of the biggest challenges leaders face today? What can we do to repair the damage that the lack of good leadership has created in our organizations? Doug Williamson offers some actionable suggestions.

The Clock is Ticking on Leadership

by **DOUG WILLIAMSON**

Leadership may very well be the second oldest profession in the world, but we still seem to have a dire shortage of good leaders at the very time we need them most. One reason for this is the fact the value of leadership has become seriously diluted by a continuing decline in the level of trust we all have in our organizations. This is true for both private and public organizations, and in their leaders, whether elected or appointed.

This cannot continue, and those of us who believe leadership is both a sacred trust and a privilege must take steps to turn the tide of declining trust. To do so, we must not shy away from holding our leaders to the highest standards of competency, character and capability that we can.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LEADERSHIP

While each organization is different, the issues and challenges they encounter are stunningly similar.

The list looks something like this:

- Lack of a full understanding of the organizational objectives;
- Lack of clarity around how decisions get made and why they are made;
- Gaps in cascading of information from the top to the bottom;
- Gaps in accountability for performance at all levels.

Even though the tone may be set from the top, the real impetus for change comes from a powerful combination of customers on the outside and middle management from within. These two 'constituencies' are the barometer by which we evaluate whether a senior leadership team has the currency of trust it needs to steward the organization through the choppy waters of change.

Without the full and enthusiastic support of these two groups, leaders simply will not have permission to lead in the way they must to make the changes that ensure continued relevance.

IT IS AN ISSUE OF CREDIBILITY

It seems the essential building block for trust lies in the credibility of those who are asked to be leaders. It may be simplistic, but without credibility, senior leaders will not have the currency they need to finance the changes. In other words, without a large pool of goodwill in the form of credibility, there will be no support, or at least not enough support, to allow the leader to spend on driving deep organizational transformation.

Simply put - the power to lead is granted by the people in direct proportion to the permission they give the leaders, based on the credibility they have earned.

This definition of leadership turns the thinking of many people on its head, and yet it is exactly the type of change in perspective needed in order to rebuild the lost levels of trust which we are witnessing in far too many places.

It begs the question of how, then, do you build credibility?

The answer is through:

- Transparency - the worst truth is still better than the best lie;
- Diversity - of input in order to examine contradictory points of view;
- Empathy - listening without judgment and connecting on a human level;
- Decision Making - focusing on the 'how' and not just the 'what.'

IMPROVE YOUR JUDGMENT AND DECISIONS

We all like to think we are better than we really are, it is a natural part of the human condition. In business, however, it can be especially fatal. An organization's value rises or falls on the sum total of all the decisions (big and small) made by all of its people over time. Consequently, it would

seem logical that senior leaders pay far more attention to the judgment behind the decisions they and their people make.

But they don't!

In fact, one of the most common symptoms of organizational under-performance lies in the realm of the decision making process and the organization's inability to make brilliant decisions quickly, rather than mediocre decisions slowly. This is a disease with a known cure, and all it takes is a leader willing to call it out and do something about it.

Here are just some of the things you can do to get better at making crucial judgments:

- Build a more diverse set of perspectives through which to frame decisions;
- Focus on the assumptions which go into the premise behind your view;
- Carefully think through the consequences, both intended and otherwise;
- Always search for more than one "right" answer.

Remember - you are only as good as your last great decision!

**STEPS TO TAKE:
ACTIONS TO CONSIDER**

Ignorance is not an excuse at the best of times, and in today's world of readily accessible information, it is simply not acceptable for any leader to remain uninformed, ill-informed or misinformed about the environment in which they operate.

The secrets of great leadership and high performance are not locked in a vault, accessible only to those with a secret key. In fact, there are no mysteries yet to be unveiled when it comes to excellence in leadership and the nature of superior performance.

The challenge lies not in the availability of answers, but rather in the:

- Deficits of candour, courage and ambition;
- Lack of willingness to ask the tough, insightful questions;
- Fear of doing the hard work necessary to make things better;
- Resistance to change, bred out of comfort with the status quo.



Here are some things to consider...

Get Outside

Leaders need to get out of their comfort zone and, for most of them, that means getting to the 'coal face' where the real people and the real customers live. Fly-by visits are not the answer, the leader of the future has to be willing to dig in and find creative ways to really interact with the people who have the insights they need to drive the changes they want.

Shake It Up

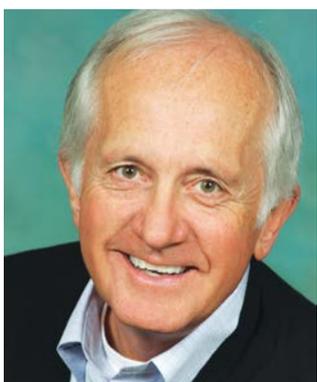
Boredom is a habit that is acquired by those who expect others to do things for them. There is no shortage of work to be done, challenges to face, problems to solve and ideas to be explored. The great leaders we know of are restless by nature and dissatisfied by temperament. There is no time like the present for the senior leader to take on the role of the Chief Agitator, or the Chief Rabble Rouser or the Chief Chaos Creator.

Don't Be Afraid of the Truth

Leaders can hide for a short time, but they cannot hide forever. The truth is liberating, if you have confidence in your ability to stare it in the face. Too many leaders allow themselves to live with the knowledge there is a gap between what they hear and what they feel. The great leaders are never afraid of knowing where they stand, because they know that moving forward is inevitable, no matter how inconvenient.

Make a Difference

The value of leaders comes not from what they manage, but how they lead. Every leader needs to be guided and fueled by a deep inner passion about something (anything). Vanilla leadership is not what today's more challenging environment demands, so get out there and find something meaningful to do.



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