

Un Capricho?

A few years ago, I received a phone call from a company I had been asked to work with previously. I turned down the opportunity at the time, but would receive calls occasionally since then. The call was “interesting,” and it went more or less like this...

CALLER: James, do you remember when you were advising us, and you helped us put together the plan for our ABC (not its real name) project? Well, the implementation process began according to plan, but after about 4 months, things started slipping.

JBR: Can you define what ‘slipping’ means?

CALLER: We started to miss our milestone dates for some of the elements of the plan. And because of this, the entire implementation is beginning to fall apart. Can you give me some hints about what we can do?

JBR: What part of the plan are you seeing the slipping taking place, and why do you think this slippage is taking place?

CALLER: Actually, there isn’t just one place. We seem to be losing traction in many areas, but mainly in the areas where our managers were leading the project elements themselves. As for why this is happening, all my managers are saying is that their teams don’t have the right people on them. We thought about changing the team members, but this will slow things down too far.

JBR: If I was there now, and I walked around and talked to some of the team members, what would they say? Would they say that your managers are providing sufficient leadership to drive the project?

CALLER: James, right about now, I don’t care how they get the project done, as long as we get back on our timelines. We have too much at stake to miss this thing. As for having sufficient levels of leadership, right about now, leading is a capricho until we get back on steam with the initiative.

The call did go on for a while, but it appeared that my message wasn’t the one the CEO was looking for. When I had met with this potential client several years earlier, it was pretty apparent that even then, demonstrating leadership was considered to be a capricho (a luxury or extravagance). This problem is not one that exclusively resided in this CEO’s mind.

The whole issue about leadership is one of choice. Leadership isn’t a job description, nor is it a set of characteristics that someone may or may not have. Leadership is seen through a series of clearly demonstrated actions that match with organisational values, and each of us has the ability to choose to do them or not do them.

For the person who rang me to declare that demonstrating leadership was a luxury shows pretty clearly that he is missing the point. He was confusing ‘what’ needed to be done, with ‘how’ was the best way to do it.

There are two ways to accomplish things in business. One way is to drive performance through hard-core management. This is the often seen take-no-prisoners approach that does deliver results. But the impact on an organisational culture is pretty dire, and requires an entire team of metaphorical policemen with metaphorical whips to keep everyone in line and on task.

The other way is to drive performance through demonstrated leadership, where the most important job is to create an environment in which 1) managers and employees know what is important, and why it is so; 2) managers and employees clearly understand how their contributions help the organisation and its customers; and 3) managers and employees understand the impact of their own individual and collective behaviours.

This doesn’t mean the objective is to create an all warm-and-fuzzy workplace where everyone hugs and sings Kumbaya all day. It does mean the objective is to create an environment in which high performance gets delivered because everyone knows how important it is. And if you are one of the bosses, it also means that you still have to make tough decisions.

If you have managers who are not demonstrating the behaviours that fit in with the environment you are trying to create, then you need to sack them. Not one day, or not some day. They need to be sacked now, because if they aren’t, the rest of the organisation will begin to believe that all the value-based demonstrated leadership is just lip service. And if that happens, then sustainable high performance will just be a lost dream, and then it will take more than a capricho for you to keep your job.

James B. Rieley advises senior leadership teams from all sectors of business and industry, higher education, and government, and has written extensively on the subject of improving organisational performance through leadership.

Un Capricho?: Questions to Consider

1. Do the initiatives and plans your organisation undertakes get completed on-time and in-full?
2. Why do you think that is?
3. Are the managers in your organisation demonstrating leadership or management?
4. Do you demonstrate leadership or management when dealing with your people?
5. What is the evidence that you do this?
6. What would your people say if they were asked which you demonstrate?
7. Do these behaviours match up with your organisaitonal values?
8. What happens to employees and managers who do not demonstrate behaviours that are congruent with organisational values?
9. What signals does that send to the organisation as a whole?
10. What can you do more of to demonstrate leadership in your company?

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