Role Modeling Leadership: A Deliberate Choice
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Introduction:

One common characteristic for all leaders is the fact that in addition to added responsibility and decision-making, becoming a "leader" includes more visibility. Whether broad-based as CEO or EVP or incremental as shift supervisor, having *authority* changes how others perceive the person. Regardless of title, leadership represents a power base.

The concept of **"shadow of the leader"** refers to the higher visibility of leadership. Staff and peers watch what leaders do, often covertly and discussing amongst themselves what they've seen. Sometimes it's direct interaction; more often it's in the context of the leader's presence, his or her "shadow." And nothing a leader writes, says or champions will ever be as powerful as what others see or think they see the leader doing.

"We" are the culture.

Managing culture – defined as the sum of all behaviors – is a balancing act. That is, balancing the need for excellence while dealing with the quirks and uncertainties of human behavior. This balance is significant in the service industry since delivering professional excellence also depends on accurate, timely human interaction. Excellence can only be achieved and sustained when both professional skill and behavior are fully aligned.

Case studies demonstrate how culture influences organizational direction and subsequent success or failure. They also suggest that senior leaders are the sole architects of culture – a fact often avoided. This is especially true relative to the behaviors they role model both as individuals and as an executive team. What they tolerate, and what they reward.

Simply acknowledging behavioral "issues and concerns" (which many organizations do) is not active listening and taking action on hard data. Acknowledgment of hearsay, aberrant personalities or rumors is quite different than purposeful decision-making. Using objective and qualitative data that cite examples with specificity is the only way to bring about change. The action required is the responsibility of each and every leader since they are the drivers of change and the primary role models within their organization.

Ultimately, the senior team is responsible for every data point collected and documented by the enterprise. This includes engagement, margin, continuous improvement, customer service, productivity – as well as behavioral data. After all, it's the senior leaders, not middle managers, VPs, team leaders or shift supervisors to whom all others report.

Focus and Forecasting.

Regardless of how a system defines and quantifies behavior, the most relevant operational metrics are the *lead* measures. In the case of lead measures related to culture, it means identifying which processes and procedures are most directly influenced by human behavior. For years studies have been published on this very subject – including definitive strategies with detailed tactical plans.

Yet in spite of the evidence, a powerful desire exists within organizations to be the "authors" or "inventors" of how best to implement culture change. They fall prey to organizational ego often expressed in general terms like, "*Our* unique culture; *Our* unusual community or industry; *Our* special situation." And organizational ego prevails even in the face of evidence-based outcomes like faster turnaround, reductions in errors-per-thousand/events, increased throughput, elimination of waste and non-value added steps, less rework, just-in-time supply chain management and sustainable increases in customer service. It boggles the mind that choices are being made to inhibit, or ignore, the need for a cultural shift in favor of political alignment and personal preferences. Yet, it happens every day.

Making Choices.

In a service industry, the vision should be a straightforward choice. Align the workforce and everything it does with the expectations of the customer. Be consistent and hold every leader accountable – no exceptions – for engaging staff and driving that vision. Of course the customer needs to understand – in detail – what can or cannot be delivered. In turn, the workforce must also understand – in detail – customer expectations. The specifics of meeting expectations must be fully aligned at all levels of leadership with consistency and accountability.

Historically, we've experienced "issues" that stymie this reasonable vision. Disciplinary silos, egotists, ill-informed leaders, soft accountability, subject matter experts instead of leaders and a tolerance for personal choice over customer choice. Many staff act – or react – out of fear of being held responsible for a mistake vs. any fear about what might happen to a customer as a result of that mistake.

For decades we've worked at bridging the gaps these issues create. We've developed strategic plans and purchased the latest best practices – from teamwork to re-engineering and high reliability. We've smiled more, inspired, cajoled and motivated daily all while preaching accountability, responsibility and personal commitment. We have rallied around the customer – but too often only in theory.

These gaps in performance are based on leader choices. Most leaders are given the responsibility to engage their staff with the presumption that they are skilled, motivated and doing so in tandem with the other leaders. The truth is most leaders are motivated by their immediate boss and reflect the boss's ideas and behaviors in the choices they make. For example, if the CEO is your boss and simply suggests that "this approach won't work here," the CEO is 100% correct. It won't work as long as *that* CEO is the leader.

Every senior leader is someone's immediate boss. So how does an organization influence that leader's powerful, often covert control? Many organizations launch culture-change strategies with great fanfare – complete with leadership training and motivational gurus along with an overabundance of tasks, exercises and "to-do" lists. Unfortunately, once the senior team has signed off on a strategic plan, the assumption is that they've made their contribution to culture change. In truth the strategic plan is simply the beginning for the senior team. Success will be defined and is predicated on how well they, personally, *execute* the strategy as a team.

This alignment of the senior team is the foundation upon which all behavior is modeled, reinforced and rewarded. Alignment is a prerequisite to consistency, just as consistency is a prerequisite to accountability. Without senior team alignment, including shared objectives, many day-to-day decisions at the staff level will be inconsistent. Performance objectives must be formal and based on specific behaviors from the CEO to the shift supervisor and must include predetermined consequences for failure as well as recognition for success. All objectives must be measured by an actual outcome – not solely the process, effort or someone's "good" intentions.

This has to be a conscious choice –100%. No entity, government regulation, licensure, local economies or certification can force this decision.

No accounting rules require a line item for behavior.

No obvious consequences will be publicly broadcast as a result of *not* making this choice.

It requires a deliberate choice while accepting the significant challenge that comes with it – changing human behavior. It is not easy, but it is possible, especially if you start with the senior team whose "shadow" casts the widest footprint.

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