

Positioning to Fill the Leadership Void

By Jeff Cowart

As paradoxical as it might seem, expanding leadership effectiveness is really about narrowing scope rather than broadening it.

Most leaders emerge from the ranks of management, and there is a substantial difference between leadership and management. With leadership, the mission is to own the strategic vision and inspire those within the organization or team to embrace it. With management, the mission is to create and execute the tactical action plans to advance the vision.

What too often happens is that leaders are confident in the management space but tentative in the leadership space. So, they hang on to management tasks and tactics for comfort, diffuse the power of their leadership, and diminish the effectiveness of execution teams.

The true leader stretches to fill this void by narrowing scope and sharpening focus on the main thing.

In my experience, three key elements are essential for those committed to becoming true leaders:

Strategy – The true leader’s purpose is to continually work on advancing position through strategic imperatives around a forward-focused vision. Strategy in today’s world is not a fixed set of goals, but rather an organic and rapidly changing adaptation to shifting variables in the market environment. This is a full-time job, and there is no time for the leader to stay comfortably rooted in the management tasks of his or her past. The leader selects an exemplary management team and effectively delegates to that team to advance the strategic vision. That includes letting go of and delegating to managers the responsibility for crafting the tactical action grids, with the leader giving up hands-on immersion in favor of oversight and review. The leader must learn and practice clear and powerful articulation of the vision and stay “on message” all day every day to help everyone remain inspired around commonly understood goals. Two of the

biggest failures of leadership are the tendency to default to the comfort zone of management and the failure to clearly communicate.

Urgency – Most organizations, and most leaders, are busy, busy, busy. Most individuals get paid to work an eight-hour day, and almost no one does. That's typically because we become caught up in what the master of change management, John Kotter, describes as our pursuit of a false sense of urgency rather than a true sense of urgency. You can recognize leaders and organizations caught up in the false sense of urgency – too many meetings, too many reports, too much frenetic energy and drama, frequent complaints about things not getting done and members of the team. True leadership calms the organization down and focuses its energy, but that does not mean lowering expectations. The leader shifts the focus to the most relevant and important goals to achieve the vision, which narrows the driving force of scope to the most important elements. The time, energy and money gets sharply focused, and the work of the management team becomes informed by the true sense of urgency rather than the false sense of urgency. Meetings become more productive, overwhelming data gets winnowed to the essential, and energy becomes intensely targeted but not frenetic.

Results – Activity is not a measure of much of anything. If we faithfully work out at the gym three times a week, and each year our weight creeps up a few pounds, our overall fitness goals are not being met although activity measurements show us to be on target. What is needed is an organic strategy that integrates workout activity in its proper place as just a driver toward a larger expected result. We need to set benchmarks for achievement at smart intervals, evaluate progress toward the overall goal against those benchmarks, and adjust and adapt strategy along the way to drive toward the larger clearly defined intent. That, in a nutshell, is the leadership imperative. In an organization, we have a team of people who will be helping to achieve the vision through aligned action. To keep them inspired, the leader must paint a clear vision, set measurable goals that are clearly understood, and give the team relevant reports of progress along the way. Results

are always the collective achievements of that team. If we are off plan, most likely we have a leadership void that needs to be addressed.

The typical organization and work unit in today's rapidly changing and sometimes disruptive environment is craving leadership. Those we lead want to know what we're doing, why we're doing it, and how we are doing at getting where we are going. The leader sets the direction and pace.

Remember, too, that the inability to clearly articulate the strategic vision, or to sharply focus around true urgency, or to set up meaningful results benchmarks, means that the leader is still setting the direction and pace – just aimlessly.