A Path to Great Leadership

It begins with assessing, confessing & addressing

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No one wants to be a lackluster leader, but somehow it happens to many. We get caught up in the day-to-day grind: stressors from customers, staff and competitors and any number of other pressures. In light of all of these unpleasant realities, it becomes even more important to carve our own path to exemplary leadership. The path will be different for each individual because we each bring all of our uniqueness, peculiarities and propensities to the table. This article details the three bricks that must be laid on whatever path you take on the journey to fulfilling your maximum potential.

The three essential bricks are assessing, confessing and addressing. These activities will help you analyze your leadership abilities. Thorough analysis enables you to work with what you have and develop what you lack. Confession gives you the ammunition to begin conversations about your development, how your style impacts your organization and your colleagues. It also gives you the communication skills to promote professional development with your staff. Finally, being able to address your specific developmental needs is what must be done to move from theoretical to practical. If you think about what you need to do and then talk about what you need to without ever doing it, both the thought and the conversation were pointless.

Assessing

Assessment can take on many different forms. You can use formal analytical tools like the Myers-Briggs or the DDI instruments. These instruments provide you with valuable insights on both your style and how it may impact others in the workplace. This information can help you better understand how you actually lead, manage resources and communicate. If you prefer a more comprehensive assessment, use any number of 360-degree measurement instruments. This approach requires you to gather the perceptions of peers, staff and superiors. An approach like this yields useful information about the perceptions that you create in the workplace. It also gives you greater insight on the impact that you have on colleagues at all levels. For many, this approach can be a bit intimidating. It forces you to look beyond how you see yourself and see the real you with a complete array of strengths and weaknesses.

You may choose a more informal approach to assessment. Consider having candid conversations with colleagues who are willing to give you straight feedback. This means that you have to select people who are both objective and unafraid of providing constructive criticism. A byproduct of this tactic is that it strengthens relationships. It may also help you develop a mentoring relationship with someone who you respect and trust.

Confessing

The old adage says that confession is good for the soul. I do not know about all of that, but I do know that confession is important in the professional development process. Once you have used assessment to gather data about who you are and how you are, you must then confess the realities to yourself. Here is an example from my own assessment: First off, I must confess that I practice avoidance. If there is a need for a diffi-

cult conversation I will avoid that discussion until it becomes imperative, which is generally a little late. As a result, I frequently let things slide when, in fact, they should be addressed.

Recently, I had an experience with a client that was uncomfortable. I needed to let someone I genuinely liked know that I did not want to participate in an activity. My reason was simple, I did not want to do it. It was not a contractual requirement. But, having the conversation was tough because the client felt that I should participate in every single social gathering. While I am a social creature, there are some gatherings that make me uncomfortable. Long story short, they were planning for me to attend this black tie gala and, at the eleventh hour, I confessed that I would not be attending. This created a few hurt feelings that could have been avoided had I not been such a wimp.

I was keenly aware of my propensity toward avoidance because I spent a lot of time discussing this with my sister, who also serves as my mentor. She has asked me to analyze both the why and when of avoidance. I have come to a few conclusions about this behavior. The first is that I pretend that if I do not address a problem, it will somehow go away. Have you ever had a difficult staff member who presented problems for you and everyone else? Have you then just tiptoed around the person and made excuses for his (or her) behavior? Have you said things like, "Well, that's just how he is," or "Just ignore her. She'll shut up eventually." These are clear signs that you too practice avoidance.

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The second conclusion I have come to is that avoiding difficult situations actually makes them worse for everyone involved. Think about it, by avoiding the difficult conversation with the problem staff, does the problem go away? No. In fact, the behaviors become more ingrained and harder to correct. Avoidance makes problems bigger ad more difficult to handle. Confessing these personal propensities allows you to deal with both the behavior and the results. This is not to say that confessing is easy. Quite the contrary — it is very difficult. But, being clear about your behavior enables you to be more aware and to modify it.

Addressing

The first two strategies give you everything that you need to address your developmental needs. There are any number of paths that you can take to plot a workable course. My preference is a six-fold process:

- Declaration of intent
- Statement of objective(s)
- Brainstorm action steps
- Prioritize action steps
- Act
- Evaluate

Let us begin with the first step — declaration of intent. This is a simple, well-thought-out statement that defines why you are working on your professional development. It is a guide.

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Think of it as your developmental statement of strategy. Examples include:

- "I am growing into a proactive leader who emphasizes learning and formal education for myself and others."
- "I am a dedicated leader who strives to balance professional dedication with the balancing of life."
- "I am a senior executive who produces consistent results that positively impact performance and people."

Whatever your intent, it must reflect both your core values and your long-term desires.

The second step is to state your specific developmental objective. This is a statement of how you plan to operationalize your strategic intent. In its specificity, it anchors intent to action. Examples of solid objectives include:

- "To better utilize the skills of department managers so they work to their fullest potential with the aim of maximizing revenue growth for the association."
- "To build a cadre of senior managers able to assume greater responsibilities in the company, our professional association and our industry."
- "To watch industry trends and gauge our activities so that we are consistently able to meet pressures of a changing business environment."

Whatever your objective, it needs to provide specificity and clarity. Skip a lot of flowery words or theoretical mumbo jumbo. Make it plain. Make it basic. Make it reflect your bottom-line intent.

The third step should be the most fun, although it can be the most difficult. Brainstorming a wide range of ideas requires you to get beyond the limitations of your own thinking. You have to exercise a lot of creativity. I generally get help at this stage. I try to enlist the assistance of friends and colleagues who think differently. I know that my limited thoughts will undoubtedly yield limited results. Adding more breadth and depth to the mixture can only yield better results. Use the brainstorming process to gather an exhaustive list of any and every activity that you could implement to make your objective reality. Even the ideas that seem preposterous should be on the list. The more divergent from your thoughts, the better. These distinctly different ideas can potentially yield innovation that you may not have otherwise considered.

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The fourth step is to take that long list and begin prioritizing. There are any number of ways to prioritize. You could do it by grabbing the low-hanging fruit first. This enables you to have quick successes that build confidence. You may prioritize based on cost. Since you know what financial resources you have (both as an individual and within the organization) you may decide to accomplish tasks based on the bucks. You may decide to prioritize based on the timing of business cycles. Crunch times are not the right time to test new approaches. Timing makes a tremendous difference in whether you can hit the mark. No matter how you decide to prioritize, it should be consistent with your intent. Make sure that your priorities reflect what you have stated in your declaration of intent.

The fifth step is action. Doing the hard work of the first four stages is wasted energy if you never implement all of those ideas. Action cannot be half-hearted. Use every bit of energy that you have to act with purpose and clear intent. Rather than frustrating yourself, focus on one or two action steps at a time. Small steps beat no steps. These small steps also allow you time for ongoing evaluation. They produce a string of successes that you can measure and celebrate.

It is that measurement and celebration that make the final step possible. Every action must be measured. Evaluate based on both execution and results. Ask yourself what you would have done differently implementing each action step. Then ask yourself if you got the results you wanted, and why or why not. It is this evaluation that enables you to track your own best practices. What are the activities that are worth repeating? How can you modify your approaches? Which pieces of your action plan can you transfer into other areas? The answers to these questions will provide a framework for your best practices.

Summary

Navigating today's business terrain can be difficult. It can be stressful. It can be trying. However, even with all of these pressures, this navigation can be rewarding, insightful and energizing. It is your mindset and approach that determine both how you navigate and the results that you get.

Use the model introduced to plot a course that ensures your continuous growth and development. Modify each step of the process so that it meets your needs. Once you have mastered the process share it with other leaders in your company so that they, too, can work on their professional development.■

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