



LEADERSHIP ACUMEN Issue 6

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Leadership Deployment (vs. Leadership Development)

“Eighty percent of success lies in showing up!”

- Woody Allen

“A mediocre plan well implemented will outperform the most brilliant plan accompanied by mediocre implementation.”

- Macnamara

In Leadership Acumen Issue 5, we looked at the overwhelming need for Leadership Development today. Let’s build off that topic and see how we might show a better ‘return on investment’ and actually enhance the leadership practices in our organizations.

So Much Education, So Little Competence

Why is it, that at a time when we have the most educated leaders and population in history, we still have so much trouble effectively leading change, motivating teams, supporting innovation, thinking and acting strategically, and calling forth the ingenuity required to solve our pressing challenges – even at the most senior levels?

Why is it, so many managers can take program after program, attend numerous seminars or conferences, and still not improve their leadership effectiveness?

Some of the answers lie first in understanding the difference between education and competency. Education helps a person know and understand theory, relationships, history, dependencies, etc. It should help one think better, drive out ignorance, and should help individuals widen their perspective.

Competency on the other hand is an assessment of an individual’s ability to match the right behaviour and practices, and apply their knowledge appropriately in decisions with respect to the situation at hand. More than this, one is seen as competent if these actions and wisdom are applied in a manner expected or valued by the observers and the surrounding community.

Therein lays the rub. Education does not equal competency. Nor actually, is it a reliable predictor of competency. In the realm of Leadership Development, Executive Development, Board Governance improvement, even Strategic Planning; theory and education is not enough. We must be concerned about how the participants in developmental efforts will implement their learning, and apply their new wisdom in day-to-day practices that will meet (or exceed) the expectations of the community around them.

We can see this in the case of a senior executive that is a ‘star’ in one organization, being recruited away to another organization; yet within a year, being clearly found to be not working out in the new organization. The issue is not the executive’s knowledge. It is their ability to adapt and apply the practices and actions that are expected or most suitable for the new corporate culture, or challenges faced

by the industry sector, or different dynamics of the local community. Of course, this phenomenon is not isolated to individuals that switch organizations. With the fast pace of change in business today, ever-rising expectations from customers, new-entrant competitors, advancing technology, and more, it is possible that an executive's current competence can be overtaken by changing community conditions. Consequently, there is a great need for continuous learning and improvement of senior leaders, Board members and other staff as well – and then effectively applying new practices in-situ.

Taken together, education and competent practice form the basis for the ever-needed ingenuity for our organizations and communities.

Are we truly engaging the skills we have?

As Woody Allen has been quoted in saying, a large degree of success comes from just showing up. We often experience difficulty in getting our people (and executives) to show up mentally, physically and emotionally together in today's workplaces. The other 20% - 40% of engagement however is the mark of difference between a mediocre leader and an inspiring, effective one.

Let's face it; leading change effectively doesn't happen just by showing up. It takes a different effort, beyond the status quo, to make a change happen. It takes extra inspiration to innovate a new product or service. It requires an extra measure of passion and commitment to implement the new strategic plan and achieve a bold new sustainable vision.

Yet, the knowing-doing gap is rampant today. The number of mediocre organizations vastly outweighs the number of excellent, progressive ones. Of the thousands of individuals and many organizations I have worked with over the years, I like to believe that most of them have had extraordinary impact and effect in their organizations and communities. However, despite all our efforts to support practical application of new practices – often up to 6 and 12 months after a program – a large percentage of well motivated and well meaning leaders still end up having limited success in implementing their own plans for improved leadership practice.

Why?

Why is it so difficult to actually deploy the leadership practices that we have been taught? Did the leaders of Enron not know that their financial affairs should be conducted differently? Of course. Did the Board members and CEO of Hydro One not know that the compensation package and expense practices of their CEO were excessive and unreasonable? Of course they understood. Do intelligent Board members that 'dip' into the affairs of the organization a few days a month (or a quarter) really think they know how to run the organization better than the CEO/management team that lives it 24/7/365? That would be foolishness. Does a senior leader really think that the new strategic plan, or global competitiveness initiative, or new partnership strategy will happen by conducting their affairs the same next year as they did last year?

That's Why You are Paid the Big Bucks!

Executive compensation has skyrocketed in the past 20 years compared to the average wage-earner. We have convinced ourselves and society that the salaries are warranted for the extra effort required, the difficulties and risks that come with the job, and so on. Unfortunately, the community and workers are starting to rebel. They don't actually see the extra efforts, the ability to successfully handle the complexities, nor any downside risks for members of the leadership cadre that fail. We consistently see

people promoted based on who they know, a dynamic ‘presence’, or professional expertise, rather than any proven *leadership* competency. Then we wonder why there is poor morale, lack of attention to the customer, or lack-lustre performance in the departments for which they are responsible.

Deploying leadership practices in an intelligent, appropriate, adaptive, strategic, mobilizing, and inspiring manner is not easy. It IS easy to “parrot” the words of empowerment, innovation, leadership, governance, duty of care, value added, network collaboration, partnership ...

It is EASY to lead an organization, people, teams when everything is going your way.

It is much harder to BE the leader and to exert adaptive leadership when transformation is required; to identify a path forward when the competitive landscape is changing, and reinvent strategy when the global economic assumptions are proving ineffective for the future. The writers of newspaper executive recruitment ads certainly understand this!

So; let’s look at some of the things that prevent leaders from leading, applying what they know, and some approaches we might take as leaders to better deploy what we have learned.

Constraints Against Effective Deployment of Leadership Practices

The act of leadership requires one to step forward and offer up their service, commitment and extra effort to enhance the condition of community. This first act in itself is difficult for several, very real, personal reasons:

- It may be more *comfortable* to just do what is ‘normal’ and not offer anything extra
- It may be culturally difficult to be seen to step forward – in Japan they have the saying “the nail that sticks it’s head up gets hammered down”.
- People may actually feel they aren’t qualified to lead, despite their title
- The establishment and status quo may appear too overwhelming to challenge
- We may worry about our personal safety or at least alienation from team members
- Aversion to enhanced responsibility and its attendant accountability
- Self-perception as a non-leader – a manager, super sales person, technical expert, etc.
- We may be energy-depleted due to the arrival of a new baby in the household, or the attention to aging parents, or distractions due to relationship difficulties with our partner
- There is very limited added benefit to leading vs. following (i.e. only a 0 - 5% pay raise)

Another aspect of deploying Leadership means that you will likely have to challenge the status quo or lead others in an adaptation initiative in response to major threat that takes you all into uncharted territory. Blocks to asserting leadership in this kind of situation include bigger issues:

- More visible, tangible rewards to staying in the ‘old’ model
- Current leaders putting roadblocks in the way of new leaders
- Lack of role models to emulate, lack of clarity as to what will be required for success
- Inability to turn theory into practice
- Intimidation from others who aspire to the leadership role(s)
- The more ‘public’ exposure of your own faults and failures
- Intellectual readiness for handling complexity, ambiguity, and making decisions that will impact a large number of others.

Despite the huge number of books published each year on this topic, there is no ‘six-point’ recipe to effective leadership for all situations! Actually, I continue to be amazed by the number of individuals in

every session I lead, which approach me and ask for the one ‘best’ way to be a better team leader, or implement innovation practices, or develop a strategic plan. Indeed, every organization, and each challenge requires a somewhat different approach in *finessing* the leadership actions required by each unique context. While we can learn a lot from other people’s successes and failures, we can’t simply replicate someone else’s actions for a different situation! Obstacles to effective leadership deployment in this aspect include:

- Assumptions that there is one ‘right’ way of handling a complex adaptation situation
- Lack of willingness to believe in one’s own judgment and experience
- *Managing* tasks, people and resources around an old context and notion that one person can know enough to have all the answers; when Adaptive Leadership requires the *facilitation* of processes and *encouragement* of teams of people in the exploration of the issue and alternative solutions toward more collaborative and multi-perspective decision-making
- Belief that a solution from an entirely different (past) context can be simply applied to the current context and situation. (If leadership was that easy, we would have far more successes that we witness.)
- Getting so caught up in carrying out our own ‘tasks’ or playing the political games, that we forget (or de-prioritize) the more important human interactions and human resources leadership elements.

Use both Theory and Reality in Applying Leadership

In theory we have few obstacles to effective leadership. Indeed, theoretically we can easily study past situations, apply 20/20 hindsight, identify how things should have been handled and then apply forward our insight to create a prescription of how to handle future challenges. In the heat of the decision-making moment, unfortunately, we rarely have the benefit of 20/20 perspective over our current situation, nor do we usually have the time to exhaustively analyze and think through all the possible consequences. Also, the priorities and perspectives of the decision maker(s) are significantly impacted by the thinking styles and values of those involved at the time – and their formative experiences leading up to that moment.

Most of the *real success* in expressing leadership happens at the interface between theory and reality, in the midst of paradox where theory and reality don’t match, and in the swirl of very personal and interpersonal difficulties, conflicts and differences of opinion.

To throw out theory and completely ‘wing it’ is as dangerous as taking a simple, impersonal, ‘cookbook’ approach. Leadership for tomorrow requires a blend of the two.

In various sessions with executives, I have asked them to imagine what advice they might give to a relative that is being challenged to step into a senior leadership role, and calls you for your help. Your answers to this question are as good as anything I might bring forward from my own experience. This advice offered is also a good reminder to all of us as to how we can deploy more effective leadership practices this coming year:

- Stand up for what you believe in. Look for consistency between your own beliefs and the values of the organization or community looking for your leadership. Make sure you know what is in your heart, and draw upon this for the courage, passion, and desire to step up and lead
- Realize that leadership is not about the destination, it is about the journey. Be adventurous, be observant, listen to the ideas and experiences of others. Be prepared to make mistakes, but turn them into learning experiences and move forward with the insight these set-backs provide.

- Take one step at a time. You don't have to solve everything at once, or indeed all by yourself. You don't have to get it 100% right at the start either. It is more important to *get started*, then improve and adapt over time.
- Consider “What are the benefits?” and also “What do you really have to lose by stepping forward?”
- Be conscious of the obstacles you may be putting in front of yourself. Are your assumptions reasonable or just worries? What do you have to do to remove them and step forward?
- Ensure you have a ‘sponsor’ or support group. Being a leader is often lonely work, and we all need a support system to help us out.
- Examine your motives. Be comfortable with the reasons you would use to justify stepping into leading.
- Communicate, Communicate, and Communicate! {And check that your communication is actually being received/interpreted in the manner you intended!}
- Once you decide to go for it; suck it up, be assertive, confident and positive.

To these suggestions I would add:

- The first suggestion above I love, and would add: *lead from the heart not the head!* Do the kinds of things you know in your heart are right, as opposed to thinking about what others might be expecting, or what will be politically correct.
- Energy – the effective management of one's own energy, and the energizing of your followers is absolutely crucial. This means recognizing your own energy patterns and when best to take certain courses of action. It also requires you to look after yourself and your own sustainability of energy. Get the positive energy flowing around you and in the people you lead!
- Get real. Get personal. Get genuine. Leadership is best when the leader is realistic, engages with people at a very personal level, and is respected for being genuine and walking his/her own talk. Admit mistakes, and work hard to fix them right away. Be forgiving and supportive when others make mistakes.
- None of the really important things in human history have been easy to accomplish. Since the core of leadership is really about leading adaptation or changing practices, realize that there will be some pain for every gain.
- Recognize that in change situations you have to start by maintaining the status quo (temporarily) while at the same time considering, planning, and then implementing the new elements on top of the existing work. This can not possibly be done in the previous normal work hours or with the same effort as before.
- Slow things down. This can seem awfully difficult in the midst of the vortex. But it is crucial. You must make time to engage others, listen to their concerns, ideas, and counsel. People naturally resist changes imposed upon them without their input.
- Refuse to make important, big decisions all by yourself. Refuse also to make the decisions for others that should be able to make their own decisions. (Even though it might seem very easy for you to do!) Today's complexity requires more collaboration and involvement of many perspectives in the important, high impact decisions. Also, in empowering others, you have to let them make their own decisions. Every time you take back the decision-making from someone you are trying to empower, (even though they may be asking you to), you are taking back power and reducing empowerment overall.

- Invest time up-front to build “team” and build the environment and capacity for front-line decision-making and empowerment – along with accountability. [Resist the urge to drive for results too soon!] To effectively lead change and take a network leadership approach, means that you have to rise up a level and let others make the more day-to-day decisions. This allows you to cast a wider scan for improved perspective. It allows you to energize and cross-connect people in the broader network of customers, suppliers, stakeholders, etc. If you are constantly required to direct “groups” or individuals -- holding the focus and providing the lead decision-making, you will be unable to lift yourself up to a higher level of leadership.
- Smile!

Ethics and Values have Always been Important; Today They are Front and Center

Finally, leadership deployment is not only about applying education and appropriate leadership practices. Just because you CAN do something, or some law doesn't expressly forbid you from doing what you are considering, doesn't mean you should take that course of action. (Witness the current controversy regarding cloning of animals and humans.) Leadership competency is a combination of intelligent thinking, appropriate practices, and the expression of sustainable values and ethics.

If a leader (or potential leader) isn't aware of their own values and beliefs, how will they convincingly express values, believably impassion others, and facilitate their engagement to co-create/support new ideas and Vision?

2010 and beyond!

January 2010 of course marks the start of a new year and decade. And, the New Year often brings forward resolutions on how we might change past practices or implement new behaviours.

So far, 2010 is shaping up to be just as difficult and unsettling as 2009 for many organizations and communities around the globe. There are major leadership forces all around us still trying to apply old approaches and contexts to the challenges of today and tomorrow – in such an obviously deficient manner! Thankfully, there are also numerous leaders fostering ingenuity and implementation of new practices.

Perhaps look around you and watch some of the most dynamic, positive, and effective leaders you can find to inspire you. Then think about what you might DO differently, or what new practices you might deploy this year, to improve your leadership competency?

All the best of success for 2010 and beyond!

 Banff Executive Leadership Inc. offers public and customized programming to improve Board Governance and Executive Leadership Practices. We also provide coaching and consulting services to Boards and Executives to help enhance their leadership practices. Please contact us if we can be of further assistance.

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