

The Three Vital Requirements for Outstanding Leadership

Isn't it amazing what is expected of us as leaders on any given day? Pick your book, and you'll find the twelve competencies, or the twenty requirements, or the fifteen absolutes for a good leader. And these have nothing to do with the regular performance objectives that are expected of us; sometimes it's enough to make us want to hide behind, well, the easy things, like putting out the daily fires.

There are three things that you can focus on as a leader that will guarantee an improvement in your team's performance and a high probability of meeting all of those performance objectives:

1. Communicating and implementing your vision. The first President Bush admitted he had trouble with "the vision thing," but he's not alone; lack of a vision remains one of the biggest trouble spots for many organizations. However, you can effectively communicate your vision if you establish these priorities:

Communicate the vision with passion, a sense of urgency and importance. After all, if you don't care, why should your team?

Let's use the example of the following strategy: we agree that we want to have an integrated IT system that takes orders from customer entry through customer fulfillment, picks up accounts receivable, and includes customer returns with account credit, and we'd like all of this accomplished within 3 years. We'll call this the Integrated Customer Fulfillment process.

Now, I deliberately chose a rather dry strategic item as it creates a more compelling opportunity for how to communicate the vision.

So how do we make this admittedly emotionless topic seem important? First, put it in terms that are meaningful to the team. For example, remind them of the importance of customer satisfaction and the linkage of these systems to customer sat. No less important, highlight to them that their jobs should be easier and more rewarding; how much quicker the employees will be able to respond to the customers in each phase of the process; how much less time will be spent on entering the same data in different steps of the process; how much less chance for error will occur; and how they can free up time to work on more challenging aspects of their job than mastering the myriad systems at their desktop.

Philip Knight, co-founder and CEO of Nike Company described his vision: "We wanted Nike to be the world's best sports and fitness company. Once you say that, you have a focus. You don't end up making wing tips or sponsoring the next Rolling Stones world tour." There is no confusion on Nike's objective in the marketplace.

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Communicate the vision repeatedly and consistently. Many organizations will use newsletters, training videos, and other formal vehicles for communicating their vision. After that, however, the informal channels become the more important breeding ground for gaining buy-in.

Returning to our example above, now that we've notified everyone that our strategic intent is to have an Integrated Customer Fulfillment process, we need to start demonstrating our commitment to it. The use of employee roundtables can be excellent for talking about and soliciting feedback on the views of the strategy and for identifying inhibitors to achieving the vision.

As we all well know, understanding doesn't necessarily lead to action. Repeatedly, we hear leaders lament that everyone seems to understand what needs to be done, and yet they don't act on it. The fact is, simply understanding is not enough to compel people to do what needs to be done. Exercise and weight-loss are often-used examples: most people do understand that being overweight is unhealthy, yet they fail to do anything about it. Like the reluctant dieter, your team needs follow-up and reinforcement to reach their goals.

Follow up on implementation. This can be the achilles heel of any strategic initiative. Fortunately, there are several ways to monitor progress.

Test if it's working. Is there acknowledgement when a deviation occurs? Back to our Integrated Customer Fulfillment process: invariably a leader will encounter decisions that will go outside the strategic framework. An effective leader will acknowledge that they've purposely deviated from the strategy.

Monitor the progress. On a periodic basis, leaders should measure the traction of their implementation. The IT implementation from our example might have a twice-yearly review, the results of which could indicate a problem with implementation or a required change in the strategic direction.

Reinforce the importance of your strategy. Are the key leaders in your organization delivering on the strategy? A quick way to permeate this within the team is to select two or three key leaders and ensure that they emulate every aspect of this new vision (compensate them, promote them, whatever makes them tick, but make it visible). Soon, others in the organization will be following their lead.

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2. Empowering your people. Now that you're effectively communicating the vision, take a minute and look around you. Most likely you are surrounded by some extremely talented people in your organization, chomping at the bit to take on more responsibility. Don't just delegate the mundane; assign them some big tasks, responsibilities that go beyond what they've done before. There is a high probability that they will deliver beyond both their and your expectations.

Back to its basic meaning, empowerment is meant to ensure that power, responsibility, and authority are pushed down to the lowest-level decision-making position within the organization.

The benefits of empowerment start with the employee. They now feel that they are part of something—they have job satisfaction as their work begins to feel more significant—and they are likely to make higher quality decisions due to their intimate knowledge of their area. It also has the added bonus of alleviating you, as the leader, to focus on your key responsibilities.

Michael Dell, hands-on CEO of Dell Computers, agrees: "One thing that has to really cut across....is engaging the workforce and having them really excited about what they're doing and how they can really make an impact on the success of the company...."

How does a leader ensure their team is empowered?

Allow your teams to determine their own goals and commitments. The empowered teams should be able to devise a set of goals and deliverables that will meet your larger objective.

Allow the team to be involved in the decision-making. Not only will teammembers learn from their involvement, they will also have "bought-in" once the strategy is determined.

Be prepared to accept the outcome. Although the temptation is great, avoid taking back the responsibility when something goes awry, or worse, claiming the credit when the outcome is favorable. Learn to be satisfied when the team has reached its goal. Resist asking for marginal improvements; rarely do they improve the results, and often they derail the team. You are not less of a leader if all you've done is said, "Great job, let's move forward."

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3. Connecting with your people. Warren Bennis, noted scholar and leadership expert, writes “Leading is getting people to *want* to do what needs to be done.” Leading is not simply getting done what needs to be done. Finding a way to connect to people in your organization is the key to creating that desire.

Ironically, connecting has become harder than ever. Despite all of the ways of communicating that are available to us, this is the one that has become the hardest. Cell phones, computers, text messaging, TV, have helped to create a kind of self-inflicted attention deficit disorder. When coupled with many teammates working remotely at home, or customer locations. or in offices around the globe, connecting can be a real challenge.

There are countless ways to improve your connections but here are two of the most successful:

Have an open door policy, even if that door is only electronic. An open door policy has always meant people could stop in to chat. Here you can find a way to make technology work for you rather than against you. Your team needs to know which communication vehicle—be it email, cellphone, instant messaging or other—works best for you, and when. So, if email is your preferred communication than you must be prepared to respond in a meaningful timeframe. If you prefer instant messaging, stress that it’s only for quick and short answers; something more may require a phone call or face-to-face meeting.

When you do have a person-to-person discussion, dedicate your time to *that* person. The paperwork, emails, or flashing light on your phone must be ignored so that you can focus on your employee. You have to connect with the employee and maintain that connection until the conversation is complete. This simple effort will go a long way in winning the commitment of your team. Legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi, describes it this way: “It is essential to understand that battles are primarily won in the hearts of men.”

Leaders are always faced with more expectations than can easily be fulfilled. You can simplify your list considerably by focusing on these 3: communicate your vision; empower your leaders; and connect with your people. You will soon see that your team *wants* to get things done. •