

The Courage to Lead

Part 1 of a 2 part series on Leadership

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By design and even by nature, a business leaders' instinct is to take the reins and lead. However, many mistakenly believe they can succeed without the support and enrollment of their organization's key influencers and staff. Time and time again we see this behavior in our consulting practice, but we have never seen this approach work. As leaders, we have to have the courage to deliver our vision through the organization by enrolling our people to bring the vision to life. In a discussion we had with a leader this month, he said, "Through my will and determination, my vision will become a reality. If needed, I will make this happen." And we had to give him the bad news: not without your organization. Courageous leaders believe and trust in their organizations. They let their people lead with them. Importantly, there are a few critical elements that need to be in place to make organizations worthy of that trust.

The Test of Leadership

A leader's courage will be tested in times of economic struggle. It is in those moments when things around us no longer make sense that we must summon the courage to lead. Sure, businesses need strategy, structure, products and services, but the people in the organizations are looking for vision, insight, and enduring values in order to stay focused and motivated during troubled times. When we fail to recognize that any business endeavor requires the hearts of the people to be engaged, we miss the true opportunity. While we agree that you can't take "hearts" to the bank, you also can't take money to the bank without them. It is our people, more than strategy, structure, technology or new products, that will hold our companies on course through economic storms.

Leadership can be Measured

The conversation must move from theory to action and in doing so become a part of our business discipline. When we are successful, our leadership values not only become visible, but quantifiable. When we can take our values and break them down into behaviors, we create accountability in the organization. During this process, we as leaders become more accountable not just to the marketplace, but to the people on both ends of the transaction; the employees and the customers.

The first step is to decide what values are important to us as leaders. Next, we have to live by them. The accountability for these values starts at the top of every company and then filters down into the organization. This means that leaders have to begin by renewing their sense of ownership of those very values. Focusing on the leadership value of "integrity", which most organizations have embraced today, was unique until companies like GE adopted this approach and proved it was good for business. That took courage to instill in a company so large, but it revolutionized the company's business environment.

The second step is to define the values as behaviors that the organization can embrace. It is easy to say the organization values teamwork, but it is hard to define and hold people accountable to the actions that make teamwork a reality in the organization.

When we embrace the idea that leadership is more than our business skills – it includes vision, insights, and enduring values – we find new ways to grow and develop our

companies. The available options for our business actually improve as our people help us achieve higher goals.

The Courage to Lead - Revisited

In times like these, when there is uncertainty in a number of core industries, leaders need to be courageous and trusted in their organizations. They need to set the direction and vision for the business, and enroll their teams to help make it a reality. They also must set the cultural guardrails for the organization in the values and behaviors that are needed to achieve the vision. Our organizations are looking for courage in their leaders and the ones that rise to the occasion, will not only win the hearts of the people in the organization, but also win in the marketplace.