Practices that distinguish high-performing leaders: commentary with Joan Bragar

What characterizes effective leadership in the middle to senior levels of organizations? Joan Bragar is the Founder and Principal of BostonLeadership Inc., a Boston-based workplace consulting and leadership coaching practice.

Prior to establishing her own firm, she was Director of Research at Forum Corporation, a leadership development organization. During her tenure at Forum, Bragar led a major research project to identify practices that distinguishes high-performing leaders. Here, she spotlights the project's findings and implications

Background

Businesses have to rely on the personal leadership of individuals at every level of the corporate structure. And as the conditions of business tend towards permanent flux, companies are also finding that the leadership they need now goes beyond traditional models. According to the Forum Corporation, a workplace consultancy based in Boston, Massachusetts, the call is for a new more flexible understanding of what leadership means.

Forum's inquiry begins at the end of a well-travelled road. Leadership has been studied and redefined since antiquity. Books examining the personalities and styles of heroes rank high on best-seller lists. Yet such studies, both popular and scholarly, are insufficient in light of the business needs of today. Forum traces the need for a fundamentally new view of business leadership to several sources. First, changing organizational structures in the modern corporation, and a new and more diverse workforce with rising expectations, diminished institutional loyalties and less reverence for authority.

As managers around the world faced these same changes, they began pushing authority downward and experimenting with empowerment management. But, in most cases reality demanded more basic reforms first. In working with clients, Forum discovered that developing company-wide leadership without new models could become a never-ending challenge for the typical corporation.

Based on this insight, Forum undertook a large research project with two objectives:

- to determine the specific practices associated with effective leadership; and

- to create a practical model of leadership for middle and senior managers.

In conducting the research, the driving question was: "What characterizes effective leadership in the middle to senior levels of organizations"

The research

The research proceeded in three stages. The first consisted of a thorough assessment of what had been learned for the existing client list, from which a database of more than 2000 key leadership and management practices was assembled. Analysis of the data identified

three primary qualities of leadership needed for steering organizations through periods of turbulence and uncertainty:

- Taking personal responsibility for initiating change.

- Creating a vision and strategy for the organization.

- Trusting and empowering others.

The second phase involved identifying the specific practices that distinguish high-performing leaders at the mid to senior level, by interviewing managers in leadership situations – and their peers and bosses – to gain first-hand information about leadership performance. The existing literature on leadership was also studied. Synthesizing these strains of thought laid the groundwork for a working model which was then submitted to a panel of high-performing managers, and refined in response to their comments.

The last stage of the research involved a comprehensive validation study, in which more than 100 successful managers provided empirical evidence to support the accuracy of the model. Statistically, 42 of the 46 practices correlated highly with the behaviours of managers who were perceived as effective leaders by their associates.

The findings

The research produced a number of important conclusions. Many of these findings are fresh and exciting. Others confirm what has been known for years. They can be summarized as follows:

- *Without leadership organizations falter in times of change*. Rapid change in organizational structures, market conditions, and the competitive environment often makes people feel tentative, vulnerable, and reluctant to act. It is precisely when the world starts shifting that effective leadership is essential to a company's success. Strong leaders see clearly and act decisively in times of turbulence. Continually seeking information from all levels of the organization and from outside sources such as sales applications, customers, and suppliers is critical to building the confidence needed to overcome organizational paralysis.

- *Leadership is critical from the boardroom to the shop floor*. During periods of rapid change in technologies, markets and competitive conditions, progress depends on personal initiative and leadership skills throughout the organization. Today's business environment is simply too complex for a single "heroic" individual to master. The same is true for current strategies, with their emphasis on quality and customer focus. They rely on decision making at every level. A few lone individuals at the top cannot implement them successfully.

- *Positions and titles bear no relationship to leadership performance*. Many business people tend to connect leadership with ascribed authority. Leaders are military commanders, CEOs, elected officials, or captains of a team. Forum's research links leadership with behaviour, not position. In fact, authority and leadership involve inherent contradictions. Exercising the power of position implies working to maintain the status quo, whereas leadership often means orchestrating change. Therefore, the extent to which an individual has to wield authority can constrain his or her ability to lead. Additionally, people are deeply sceptical of ascribed authority. New supervisors have to earn their stripes, or people will resist their attempts to lead. However, workers who demonstrate strong leadership can inspire their peers just as well as any CEO

- *Leadership involves interdependence more than individualism*. In thinking about world history, most people intuitively buy in to the "Great Man" theory – the leader as a daring but isolated achiever. Yet Forum has found that leadership has less to do with individualism than with the ability to build and maintain relationships across

the organization. In other words, it is connected to a host of other skills not normally associated with the business curriculum. Though traditional business skills are important, they are not what distinguish high performers from average ones.

- *Leaders inspire others to take on leadership tasks.* A leader is not simply someone who can win followers. A leader shows others that they themselves can lead, by giving them the power and support to do so. The ultimate goal is to enable every member of the workgroup to take part in developing a new direction, and to understand his or her role in leading others to achieve it. When such leadership suffuses the organization, it dissolves the powerless, frozen feeling that traps so many managers.

- *Outstanding management skills are an essential component of leadership.* Most management studies argue that organizations need leaders in times of change and managers in times of stability. But this theory assumes that corporations move from stability to change at clearly delineated junctures. In reality, conditions swing back and forth from day to day, even hour to hour.

- *Leadership is contextual.* Effective leadership is grounded in an extensive knowledge of the business environment, and intimate understanding of the industry, company, and workgroup, and a strong sense of the organization's strategy, culture and values. For example, a fast-growing, high-tech manufacturer may require a different brand of leadership than a large, established service company facing a decline in sales and productivity

- *Leadership can be learned.* The research has established that the ability to lead is not just a question of native talent. Rather, the skills of effective leadership can be acquired. In Forum's view, the learning process consists of three steps: first, people must understand the importance of developing leadership throughout an organization; next, they need to be shown what it means to lead; and finally, they must realize that they can become leaders themselves.

- *Leadership is not style, it is actions*. Popular mythology has always treated leadership as a matter of style and charisma. However, Forum's data indicate that the roots of effective leadership are more practical, and that leadership is based upon a set of observable behaviours. Though the emphasis may vary from industry to industry, the basic patters persist. Whatever a person's personality or character, they can improve as a leader simply by mastering these behaviours.

The study pinpointed the 20 practices in four distinct areas which correlated most highly with leadership performance and that could be taught most effectively, and they were tested for relevance and impact with individuals in over 100 large companies.

Interpreting

The first set of actions helps leaders interpret the conditions, internal and external to their organization, that affect them and their workgroup. These practices include:

- Seeking information from as many sources as possible.

- Knowing how your own work supports the organization's overall strategy.

- Analysing how well the members of the group work together.

- Knowing the capabilities and motivations of the individuals in the workgroup.

- Knowing your own capabilities and motivations.

Shaping

The next group of practices enables leaders to shape a vision and strategy to give meaning to the groups work:

- Involving the right people in developing the workgroup's strategy.

- Standing up for what is important.

- Adjusting plans and actions as necessary in turbulent situations.

- Communicating the strategy of the organization as a whole

- Creating a positive picture of the future of the workgroup.

Mobilizing

Leaders use these practices to mobilize individuals with ideas, skills, and values around a common mission:

- Communicating clearly the results expected from others.

- Appealing to people's hearts and minds to lead them in a new direction.

- Demonstrating care for the members of the workgroup.

- Demonstrating confidence in the abilities of others.

- Letting people know how they are progressing towards the group goals.

Inspiring

By practicing these behaviours, leaders inspire others to achieve results:

- Promoting the development of people's talents.

- Recognizing the contributions of others.

- Enabling others to feel and act like leaders.

- Stimulating the thinking of others.

- Building enthusiasm about projects and assignments.

Implications for the future

To link leadership development to corporate strategy, employees must be helped to overcome deep-seated patterns of thought and actions. They must learn more than tactical leadership skills.

To be effective leaders, they must know where the group is headed, understand that they have control over its direction, and feel that the direction is consistent with their own belief systems. In this way they will learn not only to triumph in times of change, but to embrace its inherent challenges.

For the corporation, employees who thrive on change provide a competitive advantage that is strong and sustainable.

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