

CONFRONT REALITY

A MANDATE FOR TODAY'S LEADERS

In today's world of always-on media, we have gone from relief at the democratization of information to feeling overwhelmed at the continual deluge of slogans, thoughts and experts sharing the next big breakthrough. It is not possible to keep up with it all, and so many of us have adopted an expert and become followers of their doctrine. The leadership world seems to have split into distinct camps, with those who follow different schools of thought left feeling as if they have very little to say to or learn from one another.

Having said this, you may be thinking that the last thing the world needs right now is *another* model of effective leadership. But this model is different; it is a simple, clear and comprehensive framework for leadership success. It speaks to both the "what" and the "how" of leadership. It does not focus on any one big thing because successful leadership is always more than one big thing. Instead, we have taken our research, our experience advising and coaching leaders across diverse organizations and our own personal experiences with leadership to distill the four deliverables and five behaviors that successful leaders have in common.

I said our model is simple - 4 deliverables and 5 core behaviors – but simple does not mean easy. Each deliverable results from a series of actions that must be taken, and each behavior listed is meant not as a one size fits all prescription but rather a reference to be personalized according to your own capabilities and strengths.

Declare, build, confront ...each is a clear action verb chosen deliberately to emphasize that leadership is about action and the leader must be an action figure. **Ensure**, while still requiring action, connotes that it must be accomplished with and through others in the organizational system. What follows is an introduction to one of the individual pieces of this framework.

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This seems to be the most difficult of all the leadership actions and in many ways is the most important. In fact, the gap between plans and results is often attributable to the lack of ongoing reality in the review process. With all of the talk of needing organization cultures built for continual change, it is those leaders who systematically confront and then react to the internal and external realities they face that build cultures adept at flexibility and renewal.

Why is this so difficult? Some of the answer is in what leaders feel they owe those they lead; a clear and sound direction, a steady course of work and an expert hand at the helm. This need to always deliver the right answer clashes with the need to stay flexible in light of ongoing changes in the environment or surprising results.

The criteria used to evaluate leadership performance also contribute to this unwillingness to confront reality. In response to the disproportionate focus on delivering measurable short-term results over longer-term contributions, there is a tendency to overlook or deny data suggesting an emerging problem. When qualitative performance assessments are made on subjective criteria



such as decisiveness or the efficient deployment of resources, a leader may view mid-course adjustments as a suicidal activity.

Even our complex quantitative measurement systems can be used to shield rather than connect us to reality. The data required by too many performance measurement systems focuses heavily on internal comparisons, year over year variances in top or bottom-line growth as an example. These variance-only analyses are not sufficient on three fronts: they fail to assess the suitability of the starting point, they fail to compare performance to competitors in sufficient relevant criteria, and they overlook benchmarking the operating processes that produced the results. When results generated from ineffective or inefficient processes are heralded as victories, cynicism sets in among the employees who struggle daily to deliver in spite of these flawed processes.

The social dynamics surrounding leaders also serve to insulate from reality. As the stress on leadership at all levels continues to increase, leaders and their direct reports often unconsciously form a support group to help cope. Leaders may subordinate the need to have difficult conversations and debates to the need to be liked and maintain a loyal base of support in the organization. In return, their direct reports serve as a moat, keeping any disconcerting data buried within their organizational silos. This behavior serves to insulate the leader from any further upset or pressure. It also serves each of the direct reports by keeping them at least even with their peers in the competition to advance.

Organizations suffering from these behaviors are fairly easy to identify, they are the ones that place polite conversation and harmony above real debate and constructive conflict. They are the ones that reward effort over results, and ultimately the ones that find the business facing an “unexpected and sudden” business crisis.

If one of the biggest obstacles to continuing success is effectively confronting reality, how do leaders overcome these dynamics and stay in touch with where their organizations really are?

We at TMT Associates have worked closely with executives and leadership teams to overcome resistance and constructively confront their unique business realities as an ongoing business process leading to greater success. We welcome the opportunity to discuss our services with you and your team. Contact be e-mail at mail@tmtassociates.com or phone 804-379-1861.

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