

PROLOGUE

Leaders are almost by definition people who change
minds.

HOWARD GARDNER, *LEADING MINDS*¹



Your organization needs a strategic resource allocation plan. With budgets being squeezed and headcount being trimmed, you need direction on what projects you should pursue and within what timeframes. You have discussed this many times with your boss, but for some reason that you do not understand, she has not acted.

So what do you do?

You take action. You take the lead *for* your boss. You develop the plan on your own and submit it to her for approval. And if she approves it, you ask for permission to move it forward. In doing so, you are filling the leadership void through prompt and decisive action. You are demonstrating what it takes to lead your boss.

But, as you will discover in this book, “leading your boss” is really a metaphor for leading from the middle. Those who lead from the middle are those who think big picture and can do what it takes to get things done so their bosses and their teams succeed. Very often such individuals lead their bosses, but they may also be leading their boss’s boss as well as their own colleagues and direct reports. Those who succeed at leading from the middle also are artful and adept managers; they utilize their management skills to

establish goals, plan projects, organize people, and execute projects on time and on budget.

Not so easy to do, but it is possible when you rethink and reframe what you want to accomplish and how you want to do it. That is, you are not acting for yourself, but you are acting for the good of the organization. This requires initiative, persuasion, influence, and persistence and no small amount of passion. Taken together this is what experts call “leading up.”



“Leading up requires great courage and determination,” writes Michael Useem, a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and author of an eponymously named book that popularized the concept. “We might fear how our superior will respond, we might doubt our right to lead up, but we all carry a responsibility to do what we can when it will make a difference.”²

Individuals who lead up are those who demonstrate that they are aware of the bigger picture and are ready, willing, and able to do what needs to be done for the good of the team. Such individuals prove their mettle when times are tough. When leading up from the middle, here are three questions to consider:

1. *What does the leader need?* The boss is responsible for her people as well as getting things done right. As a direct-report, ask yourself, what does the boss need to do her job better? It may require you to think more strategically as well as act more tactically.
2. *What does the team need?* Ideally, the team pulls together; it doesn't always happen because ego gets involved. The boss often then spends time smoothing over bruised egos. However, if a team member were to step forward and help in the “smoothing over,” it would free the boss to focus on the big picture.

3. *What can I do to help the leader and the team succeed?* The answer may involve taking on more responsibility to do a job, or it may mean stepping back to let others do theirs. For example, if the team is struggling over direction or resources, you may wish to pass (for the moment) on your personal needs. Give one up for the team so that the leader can push forward.

Turning those questions into a *plan of action* will provide a roadmap for how to lead your boss in ways that make the boss look good, the team succeed, and you emerge as a team player who is adept at making good things happen.

Put Your Plan into Action

Effective planning begins with strong preparation. This is especially true when it comes to leading up. Leading up is a form of managing up, but with a difference. Managing up denotes administrative work; leading up implies initiative. Both are essential to leading your boss effectively. Both practices are focused on helping the leader do his job better. But in leading up, the person leading up demonstrates a degree of selflessness so that the organization can benefit. It gets to the root of what leadership so often focuses on, doing what is right for others, even when it means putting yourself aside.

You need to learn to bring others together to share the vision, mission, and goals. And you need to get them to care about what they do. That's what we call leading others. How do you do this? You communicate through your actions. You channel your understanding of yourself and your mission into actions that are positive and inspirational for others so that they feel focused, engaged, and ready to win.

Your plan must include doing what is necessary to make a positive difference. The difference may be as small as eliminating one

meeting a week in order to give people more time to work on their projects. The difference may also be as bold as turning the organization upside down to make it more responsive to internal and external customers. The underlying theme is positive change. That requires a willingness to put yourself forward in order to lead others.

You can draw inspiration for your plan by reading the stories of those who know what it takes to lead up. The book cites a number of individuals whose life stories are excellent examples of leading up. Some stories are those of people who led their bosses, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Beverly Sills, and Tim Russert. Others are examples of leaders who refuse to take no for answer and lead up to defeat the odds; Barack Obama before he became president is a good case study. Still others are those who rally against convention to effect positive change; Paul Newman and Bono are examples. Another category is those who lead their organizations by merging their values with their aspirations to make good things happen; these include James Stockdale and Bo Schembechler. All of these individuals exhibit leadership and, in doing so, teach us how to lead up to make good things happen.

Senior leaders take note. You should encourage leadership from the middle ranks. Skeptics may think that leadership from below will undermine a CEO's authority. Reality dictates the opposite. When managers in the middle are taking ownership of issues, making decisions, and becoming accountable for results, then senior managers have the freedom to think and act strategically without getting bogged down in tactical matters. Organizations must be filled with people who can think for themselves as well as act with initiative and make good things happen. Such behaviors allow each level of management to engage strategically as well as execute tactically. Developing leaders who can lead from the middle is sound management practice. Not only does it create a stronger organization in the short run, it prepares emerging leaders to be more equipped for senior leadership positions. This practice time and again gives people more room to employ their talents as well as to hone their skills.

How well you lead up is also an indication of your potential to become a senior leader in your organization. Your ability to demonstrate initiative, overcome obstacles, and promote resilience is a critical measure of senior leadership. Furthermore, you will need to influence your boss as well as develop the abilities of those who report to you. Leading up well opens the door to leading the entire organization.

It takes courage to lead from the middle; more and more, such impetus from the middle is what is necessary to make organizations not only agile and nimble but the people within them responsive to customers and responsible for outcomes. Leading from the middle requires the ability to lead those who report to you as well as the ability to lead peers and those to whom you report. Leading up requires all the skills you need to lead a team as well as the application of those skills and others to lead your boss and your colleagues. In truth, leading up is a balancing act, but an act that combines the passion for results with the ability to bring people together around a common cause. This is the nature of leading up . . . that is, leading your boss, your peers, and your team.

We must have strong minds, ready to accept facts
as they are.

HARRY S TRUMAN

A little fact is worth a whole limbo of dreams.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON³

The Business Case for Leading Up

In times of economic hardship, as well as in good times, there is a strong case for men and women in the middle to lead their organizations. Very often that leadership will take the form of leading both boss and peers. Here are some data points that underscore this.

First and foremost, there is a lack of trust in senior management. For example, according to a survey conducted by the human resource firm, Watson Wyatt:

- Only 49 percent of employees have “trust and confidence” in their senior managers.
- Just 55 percent said senior leaders behaved “consistently with their companies’ core values.”
- Only 53 percent believed that senior management made “the right changes to stay competitive.”⁴

A survey of more than 800 senior managers by Booz & Company, a consulting firm, conducted in December 2008 as the recession was causing businesses to bleed red ink and consequently shed record numbers of employees, revealed that many companies were “struggling to make the right moves.” Some 40 percent of surveyed executives “doubt that their leadership has a credible plan to address the economic crisis.” Worse, nearly half of those surveyed (46 percent) lacked faith in their top leaders’ ability to execute a recovery plan.⁵ This lack of confidence is harmful to an organization’s ability to move forward and may challenge managers in the middle to become more proactive.

But CEOs have doubts, too, specifically about finding successors to current managers. And a majority of senior HR executives surveyed agree; they admit that they “struggle to identify, hire and develop mid-level managers.” These shortages are growingly acute in technical, utilities, government, healthcare, and telecommunication sectors.⁶

This causes dysfunction. For example, consider the communications issues around why projects fail. Projects fail up to 85 percent of the time when one or more of these factors are in play. These include the following:

- “Fact-free planning,” e.g., “no consideration of reality.”
- “Absent without leave sponsors,” e.g., “sponsor doesn’t provide leadership, political clout, time or energy.”

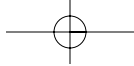
- “Skirting,” e.g., “people work around the priority-setting process and are not held accountable for doing so.”
- “Project chicken,” e.g., “team leaders and members don’t admit [problems]”[. . .]“but wait for someone else to speak up first.”
- “Team failures,” e.g., creating “dysfunction” by failure to “support the project” and failure to address their shortcomings.⁷

Clearly, some things are going wrong in the workplace. In good times, you might be able to ride them out. But when times are tough, it may become impossible. So clearly there is a need for people to step forward to correct the problems. And senior management should encourage this. But it does not always happen. According to *Manager’s Guide to Rewards*, the behavior of line managers influences “job design, career development, [and] work climate.” The *Guide* also notes that managers are responsible for recognition as well as “leadership and job enablement.”⁸ But, as we have seen, so often senior executives fail to do this. And when this happens, organizations can fail.

Let’s be honest: Managers do not set out to fail. Research shows that when managers do fail here are some of the reasons why:

- 80 percent due to “ineffective communication skills and practices.”
- 79 percent due to “poor work relationships and interpersonal skills.”
- 69 percent due to “person [and/or] job mismatch.”
- 61 percent due to failure “to clarify direction/performance expectations.”
- 56 percent due to “delegation and empowerment breakdowns.”⁹

All of these management failures could be alleviated by good, strong, and forceful leadership. And when it does not come from above, it must come from within the organization itself, chiefly from middle managers. That presents the case for leading up.



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Being honest, the case for leading up does not rely solely on statistics. Those will change over time. What really matters is how individuals and teams perform. Collectively, they comprise the performance of the entire organization. Performance is based on leadership, and much of leadership comes from the ground up. This book is devoted to showing how men and women in the middle can exert their leadership prerogatives to help themselves, their bosses, and their organizations to succeed.

