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Leading from Within

Sometimes you need to lead from behind before you can lead at all.

A colleague was complaining the other day that he had not demonstrated enough leadership. When I asked him what he meant he said that was had not been assertive enough in demonstrating what needed to be done. My colleague is an internal change agent pushing for the adoption of some new manufacturing processes; he's a recognized expert and viewed as someone who can make the new initiatives a reality. Later when I reflected on our conversation I wish I would have said, "Sometimes you need to lead from behind before you can lead at all." Leadership is very much about pointing the way and enabling others to succeed, but sometimes in order to accomplish that aim you must take a step back. You put aside what you think must be done immediately in order to allow others to progress at their own rate.

Pushing for Change

Leading from behind, or even from the middle, is a very effective means of leading, particularly during times of transition or transformation. The reason so many change efforts fail is because they are dictated from on high without letting the people in the middle and on the ground absorb, internalize and implement. That's where leadership from the ranks comes into play. When those folks take the initiative and make it their own there is a great chance for success.

One company that leverages this form of leadership is Toyota through its vaunted Toyota Production System. Based upon the principles of lean production, which can be defined as "eliminating waste to optimize value," Toyota managers and employees operate on principles of just in time delivery, *jidoka* (quality) and *kaizen* (continuous improvement). All of these endeavors are focused to do one thing: Deliver value to the customer—value that the customer desires, wants and will pay for. Sounds good, but what is remarkable is that managers in the TPS system lead on principle; people are taught through experience to do what is right within the lean value system. Easy to say but challenging to deliver. By looking at Toyota as well as other organizations, we can draw some lessons for implementing principles of leading from the middle.

- *Be open.* People want to know what's going on and their role in it. It falls to managers to make clear what the goals are and especially how those goals affect the team. At Toyota the goal is Global 15—meaning capturing 15 percent of the world's automotive market. Aside from being a good slogan, it serves as a lodestar for individual departments to point to and then "operationalize" its intent. That is, if my company is going to grow, what do I have to do to improve delivery, ensure quality and continuously improve.

- *Be facilitating.* Leadership really is the art of enabling others to succeed. Managers can do this by providing tools and resources so people have what they need to do their jobs. They also need to be available to set direction and be of counsel, that is, the team's advisor. Sometimes managers will have to jump in and help out with the workload but often it is matter of facilitation, and that starts with being available to advise, nudge and most of all, listen.
- *Be forceful.* People are people. We have our own ideas; we don't like to be dictated to. The chief engineers at Toyota, those responsible for running the vehicle programs, lead through the force of their experience as well as their knowledge and even their force of will. While few of these folks have direct reports, their authority comes from the responsibility of ensuring value to the customer in ways that leverage the principles of the Toyota Production System. As such they are regarded by some as the most powerful people within Toyota.
- *Be teaching.* One way Toyota managers teach is through the Socratic method, that is, instructing by asking questions. Employees may want information but often it will be a matter of discovering the answers for themselves. That ensures learning. It can be frustrating if someone wants quick answers, of course, and at times that is the proper method, but over time you want people to discover lessons for themselves.

Leading from Inside

Change is not a comfortable process; no one really wants to change. Getting out of the comfort zone is hard. It makes us think about what we do and the consequences of those actions. That's why sometimes you do need the strong person at the top pushing and pulling everyone. That technique is especially useful for organizations in crisis. As the CEO of Delphi, Steve Miller, a noted turnaround artist, has been front and center: He is the guy who led the company into bankruptcy; there seemed no other choice. But at the same time he has been very direct and honest with the UAW whose workforce will pay a heavy price in terms of job losses and benefits reduction. As sign of good faith, Miller surrendered his own \$1.5 million annual salary to work for \$1 per year. While Miller's role is crucial, it will be up to his leadership team and that of the union's to determine Delphi's future viability.

Crises aside, leading from ranks is a good way to ensure buy-in because it gives employees a piece of the action. They demonstrate ownership of the situation and make changes necessary to keep the organization going. This ensures that change will take root and ultimately make the organization stronger because it will have the leadership talent at all levels to tackle future challenges. Leading by taking a step back will sometimes require a swallowing of ego; you won't always be the one out front, but you will be doing the right thing for the organization.

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