

The key to unlocking your potential

Summary Points

- § The danger heuristic simplification poses to good organisational leadership
- § The problems of poor managerial culture and how such cultures militate against the promotion of leaders
- § The importance of using L & D to create and sustain good organisational leadership
- § The key characteristics of the leadership matrix

Does your company promote technical experts over leaders skilled in communication and critical thinking?

If your answer to this question is 'yes', your organisation is also likely to be hampered by the uncritical use of management trends that encourage heuristic simplification and erode the real value of leadership within your teams and management groups.

What is heuristic simplification and why is it dangerous?

Heuristic simplification is a typical response in the face of overwhelming or conflicting information that leads individuals to focus on limited—often simplified—aspects of a problem or topic.

In daily life, such a strategy is an essential skill that allows us to filter out the thousands of often irrelevant messages we are bombarded with so we can concentrate on what is of true importance to us. But business is not like daily life: managers have continual demands made of their time, attention and of their ability to remain up to date with key industry trends.

These time pressures militate against critical thinking and problem solving, making it easier for managers and the businesses for which they work to gravitate towards the latest management theories and strategies. While this is not an inherently inimical tendency, it becomes so when these theories and paradigms are allowed

to fill the void left by a lack of real critical and strategic thought.

This intellectual vacuum creates a bell-wether syndrome rather than strong organisational leadership.

This may occur under the guise of bench marking and other strategic investments made by organisations. As Stanford University professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton indicate in their latest publication, *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths & Total Nonsense* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006), the actions of business leaders rarely explain more than 10 per cent of the difference between the performance of the best and the worst organisations; that up to 70 per cent of business mergers fail to deliver quantifiable strategic or investment return improvements; and that only 30 per cent of business re-engineering projects deliver their stated goals.

The culprit is the bell-wether management syndrome, with its corresponding retreat into heuristic simplification. This occurs because it is easier to make use of well packaged and attractive solutions rather than invest time in the complex market place of ideas.

There are some easily diagnosed and specific consequences of this pattern of managerial behaviour. These consequences may inflict a form of strategic paralysis on an organisation or business unit that often becomes apparent only at a point of crisis. The sort of problems that arise may include:

- blinkered strategic vision

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- an inability to find strategic solutions best suited to the character of the organisation and its staff
- a noticeable gulf between good management theory and poorly aligned and executed management behaviour.

Poor managerial culture

In an organisational culture where managers are only enabled to manage rather than lead because of hiring practices, overemphasis on technical expertise, or rigidly controlled decision-making processes, this form of blinkered and simplified decision-making is often the most prevalent issue.

Consequently, attention is diverted away from the unglamorous aspect of implementation because it is easier to find attractively packaged ideas that deal with strategy. Often, however, these well marketed strategies leave the area of implementation untouched.

One such example of this managerial simplification was the '80s management trend of 're-engineering'. In most cases, this strategic approach was uncritically translated into retrenchments as managers pursued short-term objectives rather than implementing long-term strategic goals. Ironically, more managerial effort was directed towards linguistically disguising retrenchment as 'down sizing' or 'repositioning for growth' than actually re-engineering the organisations themselves.

In this environment it is unsurprising that many managers are promoted on the basis of technical expertise alone, with little attention paid to their

problem solving, critical thinking, leadership and communication skills. Without these skills, managers can only manage: they are in no position to lead.

If the organisation that employs them clearly values this form of managerial technical expertise over leadership and expects its managers only to implement its top level decisions, these managers will never be in a position to lead. They will never develop the capability to discern ideas, strategies or proposals presented to them or, where necessary, champion the needs of their areas of the business.

If the attributes outlined here seem idealistic, it is only because business does not always understand the inherent value of leadership. If an organisational emphasis falls on control and strategy alone, it is unlikely to invest in the learning and development resources necessary to encourage the nurturing of leaders.

What are the consequences?

The test of an organisational culture is its rate of staff turn over. People who are poorly managed, or feel frustrated, because they are continually blocked by their managers, simply leave.

Staff turn over translates directly into a loss of corporate knowledge and history and a potentially wasted investment in learning and development. Some very good organisations experience significant difficulty in retaining good staff because their organisational processes are so flawed that they leave at the first suitable opportunity.

This suggests that the emphasis frequently placed on finding 'talent' is misplaced: that talent will abandon the business at the first suitable

opportunity if it cannot meet their career needs and expectations.

This is particularly the case when 'talent' is needed to replace those experienced managers who have been retrenched and taken with them the important skills and corporate knowledge needed to develop the next generation of leaders.

The nexus between leading and learning

Developing leaders requires a partnership between managers and learning and development units. This requires a concomitant commitment of both time and financial resources to make such partnerships effective.

In short, it requires a system that is focused on the co-ordinated identification and development of talented individuals into talented leaders who can appreciate the multi-dimensional objectives of their organisation. To do so, they must be given the opportunity to develop a set of highly specific skills to help them understand the importance of managing people as well as the skills of managing and implementing systems.

It also requires abandoning the false dichotomy of 'soft' and 'hard' skills, as though one set is dispensable and the other is not. This pattern of thinking typically creates imbalanced patterns of leadership where technical expertise is regarded as being the only prerequisite. It is out of this distorted understanding that we find the bell-wether management syndrome arising because it has been overlooked that strong, balanced leadership also relies heavily on these so-called soft skills. Because of such disproportionate emphasis on technical knowledge, organisations are left with a 'guru' but without a leader.

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A strong relationship between managers and learning and development units that continues throughout their time with a business can nurture managers into becoming leaders. It will help to balance one of the recognised problems in promoting managers: whatever strengths they held before promotion will remain, but so will whatever weaknesses, and promotion may magnify those weaknesses at the expense of the very reasons for the promotion. A sustained mentoring program developed for use between managers and learning and development units can address those weaknesses and implement a systematic approach to professional development that will identify and address them.

This concept requires serious consideration to be given to the learning and development needs of managers. It requires a systematically and carefully developed strategy through which managers are taught the skills of communication, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving. It also requires an organisation to be fully committed to allocating the necessary resources to make this possible and, by doing so, creating a culture in which leadership, rather than managerial promotion, is valued and people within the organisation aspire to be the best.

The positive changes this approach can create in terms of employee morale and management style should not be overlooked. What may be considered to be intangible benefits accrue from a dedicated approach to the nurturing of leadership within an organisation.

Difficult issues such as succession planning are more easily dealt with in a way that ensures the continuity of the organisational culture and its historical knowledge. This also helps

to ensure that the people selected for leadership positions are more likely to be aligned with the organisation's values and practices.

An investment in developing such key learning and development and leadership resources is underpinned by a fundamental recognition that what cannot always be hired are staff who are leaders, thinkers, problem solvers and skilled communicators. This is particularly the case when, as with many multi-national corporations, the retrenchment cycles of the last 20 years have all but decimated their ranks of potential leaders and they now realise how much historical and cultural knowledge of the organisation has been lost.

Carefully developed and consistently applied learning and development support for managers will help them, and their organisation, understand they are the fundamental links for their business units and, collectively, for the organisation as a whole. They are the ones who must lead a group of disparate individuals in a direction they may not wish to follow and they must understand how to do so.

Developing and nurturing leaders

The essential skills of any leader are multi-faceted and complex. These skills involve key social competencies and the capacity to use emotional intelligence to create the necessary atmosphere of trust and harmony in which teams flourish. This is the primary responsibility of the leader and one that cannot be delegated. Nor should managers be so restricted in their autonomy that they have no real opportunity to lead.

A good learning and development partnership, which acts in a similar manner to a mentor relationship, will allow a sustained focus on

developing key behavioural characteristics such as:

- active listening
- critical thinking
- problem solving
- team dynamics
- communication skills
- democratic management
- decision-making skills.

These key 'motivators' are complemented by the development of task oriented skills such as:

- delegation
- work flow allocation
- responsive team building
- hiring practices
- maintenance of quality standards
- key goal setting requirements.

This already indicates the complex matrix of skills that underlie good leadership. All too often, managers who are not competent leaders seek to focus on what lies at the heart of this matrix—motivation and strategic planning—without understanding what feeds it.

To achieve this sort of result, there must be a willingness to reflect upon personal and organisational values and patterns of behaviour. Graduate recruitment must be aimed at developing leadership expertise alongside technical expertise, for example, in order to create and

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sustain this atmosphere of critical self-reflection and continuous improvement.

It must be endorsed by the most senior levels of the organisation and time and resources made available for it to take root and become a central part of the organisation's values and strategic vision. Along the way it will also force change which, if it is carefully considered, will yield greater results than simply abdicating leadership in favour of a managerial style that relies upon management recipes which are adopted only because of their succinct and easily digested style.

To discuss your management and communication training needs, or to review your organisation's current strategy, please contact Wood Brown & Company on our website at www.wbco.com.au or telephone:

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