

GREAT LEADERS DON'T ASPIRE TO BE GREAT MANAGERS

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PASSION

Great leaders don't train to be great managers. Although they may manage an organization well, they become stars of an organization by looking far beyond that, using their specific and general skills to create dynamic change.

What sets the stars of industry apart from mediocre businesses that simply struggle to survive is a question that continues to challenge business experts. Many believe that success can be attributed to effective leadership and a clear vision. The frustration often echoed among business professionals and entrepreneurs is the difficulty of finding the secret to becoming an effective and respected leader. As leadership and management expert Warren Bennis has said, the key is having the capacity to generate intellectual capital—and great leadership is the key to realizing intellectual capital's full potential.

In this era of reality programs, television glamorizes the successes of TV participants and their hosts, making it appear that anyone can easily become a fantastic leader. Don't you wish you could simply walk into your office tomorrow morning and have your objectives set forth, enjoy the respect of your peers, and possess such a strong focus on your goals that there is no denying your greatness? Sure, it's a nice dream, but business reality shows don't come close to reality, except that you could get fired.

Managing a company gives you the opportunity to lead your organization to ultimate success—it's the Holy Grail that business people seek. And it sounds simple. It sounds like something you could do by waking up one morning and saying to yourself "*I am going to lead my company to greatness by being an effective leader.*" Yet, this is one of the most difficult challenges for every single businessperson, including us.

We all have good intentions and want to be leaders who, in the end, help our organizations to prosper and create a loyal following from both our employees and customers. But only a few are recognized for their leadership abilities and vision—the rest are left muddling in mediocrity. The successful ones make it look so simple, as if the rest of us were unfocused and lazy. Why do many businesspeople put up with mediocrity and get stuck muddling through the details?

In a recent conversation with a group of twenty-five aspiring CMAs (candidates of the Society for Management Accountants of Canada) studying in the Strategic Leadership Certification Program (Canada's future business leaders), we asked, "What do you expect to gain by completing your education?" The answer was shocking. They responded by saying that they want to be great managers. Why was this a shocking response? Because management is a function, not an aspiration. Think back to when you were a child and someone asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up. Did you respond by saying "a really swell manager"?

We often sabotage ourselves and become victims of our own limited vision. Aspiring to be great managers is an example of this mediocre thinking. All too often we confuse leadership with effective management and this can be a fatal business mistake. Successful business leaders never aspired to be better or more effective managers. Management is a necessary function for the efficient operation of a business. It doesn't lead an organization to greatness and differentiation. In all of the leading corporations in the world, not one involved efficient management leading the charge to greatness.

In 1998, Fortune magazine's list of America's most admired companies identified the common denominator of exemplary organizations. "The truth is that no one factor makes a company admirable," wrote Thomas Stewart, "but if you were forced to pick the one that makes the most difference, you'd pick leadership" (Bennis, 1999).

The Critical Difference

Management is defined (www.dictionary.com) as:

1. The act, manner, or practice of managing; handling, supervision, or control: *management of a crisis; management of factory workers.*
2. The person or persons who control or direct a business or other enterprise.

Although some may argue that this definition offers little distinction between management and leadership, the subtle difference is there. Many leadership experts will attest that there are definable characteristics that make leaders what they are, including providing a purpose, getting results, building trust, and demonstrating integrity. These are primary leadership skills we don't often witness in the "reality" of business reality television programs. And those contestants that actually bring some of these traits into the show are quickly seen as threats and are often the first eliminated.

Art does sometimes imitate life but it is more often the reverse. In everyday business we see the obstacles raised by individuals who feel threatened in some way by potential leaders within their organizations. Those who overcome the obstacles, who are fortunate enough to work with progressive organizations or for themselves, are the ones we read about and who set an example for the rest of us.

How to Add Real Value

Striving to be an effective leader is one part of the equation. The other part is leveraging strategic leadership skills and personal vision to add real value for you and the organization. Adding value involves leveraging the capacity of the knowledge economy, but not in the same tried-and-true—that's not real value. This is especially true and essential for businesses that are commodity oriented.

Adding value begins by creating your vision and then developing a strong strategic direction. The value is added when you execute the vision through strategic implementation. The problem that arises is that visions can be clouded by routine concerns and daily business operations. This is where management and leadership become confused. Your goal is to make certain you are running in the right race and following the vision. If you don't put in the checks and balances that will keep you on track and in the right lane, you will not provide purpose and will compromise your leadership in the eyes of your team.

This is when you need to get back to the basics. Leadership is not about glory but about challenging the preconceived notions and the status quo. It is about knowing yourself, understanding your values, and building integrity in yourself and others.

Toward Intrapreneurship

In our formal business education, we are taught the functions of business and the basis of entrepreneurship. What is probably more fundamental is the need to find our motivation, not by defining what we do or how we do it (e.g., I am an accountant or a controller), but by finding our internal drive to do something worthwhile and different. In other words, commit to your beliefs and do what counts. This is the true test of leadership.

An entrepreneur is one who looks for solutions among two or more (*entre*) resources, usually externally. *Intrapreneurs* look within themselves to determine whether the goals they set themselves are within their sights. They follow their values and seek out solutions that will be noticed. Intrapreneurial

qualities are often found in an entrepreneur, but intrapreneurs are also found in many organizations and professional associations/orders, and their numbers are steadily rising. These are the future leaders of business. This fundamental drive can't be taught or instilled; the individual must discover it. Those who recognize their intrapreneurial traits know that they are destined to make a difference and don't compromise their values, possessing an unwavering focus in whatever they do.

So Now What?

This article isn't intended to be an in-depth analysis of leadership. Our intention is to simply explain to existing and future businesspeople that doing things the old way is no longer acceptable to become a leader in our knowledge economy. Business principals can't be violated, but creativity is a must.

The marketplace is demanding more from business professionals. Business leaders, including learning professionals, must exhibit strong management skills and strong strategic capabilities, but most importantly, they need to demonstrate adaptable leadership abilities and exercise their intrapreneurial traits that directly contribute to creating value in whatever they tackle.

Future success requires applying an existing set of skills and intrinsic abilities with a new paradigm. Leadership begins by knowing yourself well, having the right focus, and executing an appropriate strategy—working beyond the skills of just a good manager.

Becoming a Free Agent

A new dynamic is forming among knowledge organizations today. More independent and empowered individuals have appeared, now that the loyalty contract once valued between employee and employer no longer exists. Every employee is becoming the equivalent of a free agent. Individuals are no longer working for an organization; instead, they're renting their skills, knowledge, and experience to an organization to move them toward their objectives. People realize that they are in control and have a choice of where they want to work and can choose what they want to do. Leadership is the number one challenge, and your skills must continually evolve to meet changing business needs. One thing is certain: real leaders are now more essential than ever to compete in converging markets.

Progressive organizations now foster flexible structures and adaptable thinking. Often, influence isn't where you expect it to be. The dynamics of this type of organization may be challenging, but it also offers greater opportunities for innovation, competitiveness, and profitability. It is time to embrace this reality and learn to leverage what you have at your disposal.

Many exemplary leaders in our time rose to the leadership challenge and leveraged the power of their free agents. For instance, Percy Barnevik, former chairman of ABB and one of Europe's most celebrated business leaders, once said, "Organizations ensure that people use only 5 to 10 percent of their abilities at work. Outside of work, they engage the other 90 to 95 percent." The challenge for leaders, he added, is "to learn how to recognize and employ that untapped ability" (Bennis, 1999). There are substantial benefits to using your leadership abilities to leverage your organization's collective brainpower, ideas, and innovation.

References

Bennis, W. (1999, Spring). The leadership advantage. *Leader to Leader*, 12.

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