

Framing the future

Tony Manning

Most organizations – and most people inside them – never reach their true potential. Almost always, a lack of leadership and lousy strategy get the blame. But by thinking differently about these two key factors, you can make a difference more easily than you think.

The starting point to high performance is to have a clear grasp of what leadership and strategy are about, and what the work of leaders and strategists involves. Get that straight, and much else falls into place.

Leadership is a big topic. There are so many views on what it is, who can do it, and how, that it's hard to separate fact from fantasy. But when you cut through the mumbo-jumbo, there are just a few things you need to know.

Leadership is a gift. We may be born with what it takes, or given the chance to learn it. How we use our talents and opportunities – whether we “use them or lose them” – is a matter of personal choice. Virtually all of us are blessed with more abilities than we realise. And we also have more opportunities to use them than we acknowledge.

There's a lot of talk about the difference between leaders and managers, but to fret over which category you fit into is just as pointless as trying to stereotype the people around you. After all, leadership involves managing: you have to get involved with dirty detail, decide priorities, drive action, and so on. And in the same way, management cannot be effective without a hefty element of leadership: good managers focus people on doing the right stuff, on finding new ways to do it, and on stretching past expected performance.

The task of any leader is to get results through other people. The only way to do that is to create a community of champions. That, in turn, requires that you:

1. Help people make sense of a confusing world, and sift what's important and demands attention from what should be ignored.
2. Create conditions – an organizational climate – in which people will fly, not flounder.

But hang on a second. Isn't this exactly what strategists need to do?

Of course it is. So here's another blindingly obvious truth that most executives haven't noticed. Leadership and strategy are inter-twined. They're two sides of the same coin. Organizations need both to be successful.

In this hyper-competitive age, it's hard hang onto to any advantage for long. Doing so hinges increasingly on the depth of talent you develop in your team – on having the highest possible “strategic IQ” in as many people as possible. Both leadership and the ability to think and act strategically need to be widely distributed.

How do you do make it happen? Not, as you might imagine, through some long, complex, or costly process. Instead, come back to the two fundamental tools all executives have to work with.

Think of them as frames. One is the frame through which we see the world. The other is the frame around the space in which people work.

The first frame contains our mental models. It defines our view of reality, of possibilities, and of how we should act in specific circumstances. One firm sees a weak Rand as good news, another as catastrophe. One sees the emerging black market as a sensational growth opportunity, another sees only the difficulty in learning how to sell to unfamiliar customers.

All of us frame every aspect of our lives. So it's the work of strategist-leaders to encourage people to cut through the clutter of everyday issues, to see possibilities instead of problems, to imagine fresh answers to the thorniest of challenges – and to focus on just a few key issues than countless interesting ones.

To ensure that this occurs, the second frame needs attention. Is workspace nourishing or toxic? Does it inspire people to great things, or bore them into being ordinary? Does it enable them to think and exercise their imagination ... or does it stifle them?

The best leaders frame the world in a way that's clear, understandable, inspiring. And they frame the space their people occupy so it turns them on, not off. The best strategists do exactly the same. Easy, isn't it?

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