The Need for High Performing Leadership in Today's Construction World

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Leadership in many contemporary businesses has been changing dramatically over the past few years. It is more inclusive, strategic and "emotionally intelligent" than ever before. Often called High Performing Leadership (HPL), the reason for the change is not that managers suddenly decided that a HPL approach was "better," but rather, that it produced results. High performing leaders are able to accomplish what every leader wants: "To inspire others to follow them to places they might not ordinarily go." Naturally, when followers are willing to try new ways of building structures, using technology, listening to customers, or communicating with their teams, a company stays ahead of its competition and exceeds its financial, process and people goals.

The climate and culture of a high-performance organization is created from the leader's practices. Picture "Joe's" weekly staff meeting, for example. The usual participants are in the room—his top financial, estimating, project, HR and IT leaders—but his agenda is anything but typical. Today, he opens by saying, "As I mentioned in the agenda I sent you, I want us to develop our teamwork. I know we can only do this if we're clear about where we're headed and open with each other about how to get there. I don't think we can set a clear direction and strategy if we don't really express our beliefs and ideas. So, before we dive into bigger questions, I want to be sure we all feel free to say what's on our minds. I don't think any subject is "off limits," including how I'm doing in my job. So, let's start with me. I need for us to have the most productive and open staff meetings possible, and I don't think we're there yet. So, what do you like about our meetings? What am I doing right? What doesn't work? What can I improve upon? I'd like everybody to speak, so let's go around the table."

This is one example of how high performing leadership soon leads to different bottom-line results. Asking for feedback is rare — especially face-to-face—and even anonymous questionnaires or feedback tools are used all-too-infrequently in most companies. Yet, when a leader begins to asks questions such as these, he or she helps create a climate in which people feel it's possible to take risks. They may risk offering creative ideas about a new business approach or other suggestions concerning how to improve the business. The out-dated procedures, the wasteful redundancies, the superintendent whom everyone fears, or the way that customers are treated can be opened up for examination. High performing leaders seek this valuable information, and it is in these organizations that we usually find exceptionally motivated and results-oriented employees serving exceptionally satisfied and admiring

customers.

High performing leaders know that success is built upon clear values and consistent efforts to guide and motivate others—not by having power *over them*, but by powerfully working **with and through** them to accomplish the mission of the company. How does one become the leader who works seamlessly with and through others? We suggest a four-part recipe—with significant room for personal experimentation! Start with gaining conceptual knowledge, sprinkle in art and intuition, seek a segment of science, and then add lots of practice. These four parts have to be mixed well, as there's no simple sequential recipe for learning to lead.

Leadership is not about the position one holds in a business or the number of direct reports one has. Leadership can be manifested through taking charge of one's own life, supervising a team of three carpenters or running a large company. Fundamentally, leaders do things differently because they have reflected on where they (and their team) need to go and how to get there. They have taken risks which helped them learn what works best for themselves and their organizations. Ultimately, these individuals convey the confidence, competence, and trust to inspire others to follow them into new and uncharted territory.

LEADERS VS. MANAGERS

First, it's important to point out that leaders and managers are not the same thing. Warren Bennis, a leadership scholar, sums up the differences in this way: "**Managers do things right; Leaders do the right things**." This simple phrase implies quite a lot. Managers must be focused on the day-to-day realities of their organizations: Operations, tactics, coordination, scheduling and so on. It's important to get these things right so the person, team, unit or organization runs smoothly, efficiently and meets expectations.

Leaders, on the other hand, must be focused on today <u>and</u> tomorrow. They continually assess what needs to be done to prepare their team or organization to meet challenges that have already emerged, as well as problems and opportunities that may yet emerge. Like managers, leaders have to face current realities; they also think about and interpret how these realities may change. That's why another truism for leaders is that they "Manage Change." Leaders who pay attention to the key factors outside and inside their organizations manage to avoid roadblocks and manage change most effectively. While a leader can easily be a manager, too often managers do not behave as leaders. Bennis often asserts that most organizations are "over-managed and under-led."

If a leader is concerned with doing the "right things," how does s/he know what that

might be? And what tools or instruments will enable him to achieve the results he thinks are the right ones to achieve? Skilled tradespeople use hammers, levels, welding torches and computers to help them build a structure. What are a leader's tools, and how can s/he put them into service in choosing the right direction?

CREDIBILITY IS KEY

It's perhaps both a blessing and a curse that *the most important tool* in being a skilled leader is **<u>oneself</u>**. The person must bring his *whole* self to the job and then sharpen, calibrate, and hone himself to lead well. A depth of self-knowledge—about one's voice, values, temperament and behaviors—cause others to willingly follow someone. Kouzes and Posner suggest that the most important element in effective leadership is *credibility* — not one's ability to produce a widget or an elegant design. Most of us know already what enhances credibility (as well as what can damage it):

- **Honesty and trustworthiness**
You may be able to ***command*** people who <u>do not</u> trust you...You ***inspire and influence*** those people who <u>do</u> trust you.

- **Inspirational**
Are you realistically optimistic? Are you a "can-do" person who usually believes it can be done (and you'll find a way to make it happen). Do you give followers hope?

- **Competence**
Have you learned enough about the technicalities of your role that you show good judgment and a record of high performance? Do people rely on your judgment?

- **Forward-Looking**
This quality most distinguishes **leaders** from other people who are also credible (like writers, for example)! Do you deal with putting out fires and managing the day-to-day, or do you strive to create an organization that will have far fewer fires?

Credibility is a core attribute that will ultimately distinguish an effective leader from one who is not effective—it's a core aspect of "being." It's also necessary, of course, for a leader to act. She has to "do" the right things as well as "be" a credible individual.

We can again use the vast research of Kouzes and Posner to identify five areas that

constitute the fundamentals for conducting oneself as a high performing leader:

Model the Way

- Be clear about and articulate your values and beliefs
- Make certain that people know about and adhere to agreed-upon values (e.g., "our company listens to customers")
- Be consistent in "walking the talk"

Inspire a Shared Vision

- Describe to others the kind of future you can create together
- Show others how their interests can be fulfilled by a common
- Clearly communicate a positive, optimistic and helpful outlook

SIDEBAR:
"Since the function of leadership is to produce change, setting the direction of that change is fundamental to leadership."

John Kotter, *"What Leaders Really Do"*

Challenge the Process

- Experiment and take risks, even though you might fail
- Ask "what can we learn?" when things don't go as expected; don't blame individuals
- Always look for ways to improve and innovate

Enable Others to Act

- Involve others in planning the action that affects them
- Give people the freedom to make their own decisions
- Create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust

Encourage the Heart

Praise people for a job well done
Celebrate when project milestones are met

- Link rewards to achievements

THE NEED FOR LEADING TEAMS

Construction companies rest on collaborative action and teamwork, so their leaders need to understand, value and be extremely competent in one additional skill—leading teams. Much of what leaders do to build strong teams is the same as what they do in the five fundamental areas of expertise — Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, and so on. Yet, the

following five additional practices are critically important for high performing leaders to embrace:

1. **<u>Get and keep the right people</u>.** Decide and act upon which people to put on the team and who needs to go. Hire and work hard to retain those people who match your team/company culture, and contribute to its vision and goals. Remove people who can't or won't play by the performance rules and values of the company.

2. **<u>Get and keep complementary skills and knowledge</u>.** Complementarity will strengthen a team. We too often hire people exactly like us. The best performing teams combine individuals with different technical knowledge, decision-making and interpersonal skills and temperaments, yet all are focused on accomplishing the team mission. Learn about temperament differences with an instrument like the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI). Be aware that with a variety of approaches, more time may be needed to ensure communication is open, conflict is well-managed and all voices are heard. It will certainly pay-off to take the time needed.

3. **<u>Clarify shared performance goals</u>.** Team leaders clarify the performance goals of the team/unit/company with the team. They monitor progress towards goals and reward goal accomplishment (and take corrective action for goals not met).

4. **<u>Establish clear procedures for team processes</u>.** Review not just WHAT the team will do but HOW it will do it. Clarify procedures, approaches, roles and responsibilities for collaboration and team action.

5. **<u>Ensure a supportive environment</u>**. Create an environment of open communication, feedback, continuous learning, and mutual accountability. In a true team, members do not just feel accountable to the boss…they feel accountable to *each other*.

High performance leadership needs to be learned just like any other skill or profession. It takes attention, intention, and most importantly, a desire to become the leader which your

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organization needs to create the future.   High performing leaders don't wait for events to surprise them; they manage change eagerly. They also know that any change begins with themselves and so they clarify their values and model the way for others to follow. High performing leaders take their responsibility seriously in building high performing businesses— they focus on staying ahead of the present problems in order to do what's right—for their team, their customers, their employees, and their organization's success.

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