



## LEADING FROM THE FRONT

*“Follow Me!” (Not, “I’ll Be There in a Minute . . .”)*

Every organization is a reflection of its leadership. More specifically, every organization is only as strong or as weak as its leaders. Hence, if CEOs want to bring about change they must start at the top—personally and then with their direct reports.

If you don’t believe this to be inexorably true, consider the dynamic and almost metaphysical turnarounds, positive and negative, at IBM under Lou Gerstner; Hewlett-Packard under Carly Fiorina; Merck under Ray Gilmartin; Apple under John Sculley (and then Steve Jobs); HealthSouth under Richard Scrushy; Alcatel-Lucent under Patricia Russo; the city of Washington, D. C., under Mayor Marion Barry; the army under Ulysses S. Grant; and New York City’s infrastructure development under Robert Moses.

One person does make the difference, even in complex, heterogeneous, and political organizations.

When you learn to be an officer in the military, “leading from the front” is a very clear, straightforward, ingrained discipline. And when you go into combat you learn very quickly, and firsthand, that when the time comes to charge, your people will rush in only if they trust that you will be there in the front: “Follow me!” not “I’ll be there in a minute.” In business, even though one could make the valid

case that lives are not at stake in the same way they are in combat, we believe that the companies that have become the most powerful and successful are those that bring the same level of passion, commitment, and accountability to the game—as if lives are at stake. In order to generate the power of strategic commitment the CEO must “lead from the front.”

The most powerful and inspiring CEOs are those who truly hold themselves accountable for everything—and they consider it a privilege, not a burden or obligation. When things go well they give the credit to others, and when things go badly they take personal responsibility. They look to see where they can provide greater leadership in direction, demand for excellence, or inspiration and motivation in order to correct things and elevate their teams. They view the orientation around blame and fault as cancerous, so when things go wrong they avoid asking “Who’s fault is it?” and orient themselves and their people only around conversations that make a difference: “What’s missing?” “What’s in the way?” “What needs to be corrected?” and “What can we learn from this?” In short, they seek *cause*, not *blame*. They understand that the most important thing to do with bad past events is to learn as much as possible from them (otherwise, by default, these bad events become the excuses and justifications for excessive caution, leading to reduced future performance).

Powerful CEOs view other people’s elevation and achievements as their own personal achievement, hence, they are oriented around motivating, elevating, empowering, coaching, and developing people. They are not threatened by others’ successes or stature. They put their egos aside and see their mission in life as achieving great results though extremely empowered people. And this keeps them humble. The role of leaders should be to develop their successors, and their true test is if they are able to develop leaders around them who are greater and stronger than they are. From our combined experience, however, we have found this to be the exception not the rule. Far more prevalent are managers and employees who feel their ability to

step up and grow is limited because superiors feel threatened by their growing stature. (For a great historical example, see *Team of Rivals*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin, about Lincoln's ability to share credit, take blame, and create common cause for otherwise antithetical interests.)

Taking on real change is like signing a blank check. It is a wholehearted commitment without knowing in advance everything it is going to entail—what we refer to as an “unconditional” commitment. (We will expand on this principle in the next chapter.)

A change initiative is a personal commitment for the CEO; so before taking it on, the CEO should ask a series of key questions to determine if she is truly committed and ready for the journey:

- ▣ Do I have a clear sense of where I am headed? Do I know where I want to be, even if I don't yet know how to get there?
- ▣ Am I convinced that the way it is today is not good enough?
- ▣ Do I have what it takes to follow through, no matter how difficult, messy, and uncomfortable it may get? Do I have the courage, the patience, and the energy?
- ▣ Will I doubt, second-guess, or reduce my passion when things become turbulent?
- ▣ Will I give up and allow the initiative to fall between the cracks when the going gets tough or the results don't show up fast enough?
- ▣ Will I stay the course even if it is uncomfortable or I look bad for a while and feel inadequate along the way?

### StratComment

*“Leader” and “exemplar” are really inseparable descriptions. If a leader isn't exemplifying the behaviors, values, and results cherished in the organization, then that leader will fail and is a failure.*

(Recall that Warren Buffett was called “too old” and “out of touch” when he refused to take part in the technology bubble, which he correctly predicted would crash.) Or will I come up with excuses, reasons, and stories when things get tough?

- ▣ Do I have tolerance for things to get worse before they get better (in change initiatives this is often the case)?
- ▣ Will I commit to driving the desired business results by engaging, inspiring, empowering, and motivating people?
- ▣ Will I commit to generating an environment of open, honest, and real communication? Will I support an environment where people tell the truth (no lip service and lies) and give honest feedback even about the tough subjects, including about my leaders and me, and where commitment not compliance is the standard? Or will I only be open when there is good news, which will inevitably breed silos, politics, and fear?
- ▣ Will I dedicate the time and effort to mentor, coach, and elevate my leaders?
- ▣ Will I invest the time and effort to engage my organization, and ensure my people experience me as available, accessible, and feel my presence?
- ▣ Will I commit to leading from the front and always taking the view that I am the source of the good and bad things that are happening in this organization? Or will I blame others and circumstances when things don't go well?
- ▣ Will I make clear declarations and put my reputation on the line with my own superiors and the board about where I'm headed and how I'll lead to get there?

Let's explore this topic further.

## **The Résumé of the Senior Leadership Team: Ten Essential Leadership Competencies and Qualities**

The senior leadership team must also do the same—hold themselves accountable for leading from the front and leading by example, thereby being powerful role models. It doesn't matter what people read and hear, because they will watch how the CEO and top team members are behaving and will take their cues from them.

Doubts about their leader's individual or collective sincerity, courage, competence, or concern for the workforce will undermine people's commitment. You can't proclaim that you are supporting the organization's value that the customer is supreme if you refuse to take customers' calls. In a notoriously egregious example, one CEO pushed his executives to buy into a cost-cutting program while simultaneously spending several hundred thousand dollars on a private exercise room in the office adjacent to his own. No wonder he was having trouble getting people to take the cost-cutting campaign seriously. While this may be an extreme case, it is not at all unusual for managers to view their leaders as hypocrites when they are facing cost-cutting mandates yet see their leaders continuing to spend on events, entertainment, and even office upgrades that appear extravagant.

There are ten leadership qualities and competencies that leaders must individually and collectively internalize and demonstrate to meet this challenge. They are listed in Figure 5-1 and will be discussed, one by one, in the following sections. See also Appendix, page 234.