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## Leader – Look in the Mirror – Recalibrate Your Perspective

By Rick Loghry

Leadership is a wonderful opportunity. You have your hands on the controls of your organization. If you don't like what is going on, then look in the mirror. You are setting the standard on what is expected, what is acceptable, and what is possible. If you ask for it, you can get valuable feedback from your employees, customers, and owners that just might change your perspective.

People are your organization's most valuable resource. Many leaders say it, but too few leaders act like it. People are street smart. You can't fool them very long. People don't forget what you do or how you act, but they will quickly forget what you say unless it is contrary to your actions. The old saying is true – 'Talk talks, walk talks, but walk talks louder than talk talks'!

You become isolated from the realities of working in your organization. People filter what they tell you. But, in a very short period of time you can get valuable input from all of your employees to recalibrate your perspective. This input will help you get a picture of how people view working in your organization compared to what you think or how you might want things to be. It is difficult for you to get straight-forward, objective feedback through the normal chain of command. Getting feedback that is politically correct or feedback that your people think you want to hear only serves to build your ego, not your business. Time is money. Any process, any practice, or any behavior that wastes your people's time or contributes to non-productive energy wastes your money.

If you want to get a quick feel for what your people think, what frustrates your people, and what is being filtered in the communication to you, then commit to do a few simple exercises. The time it takes is minor compared to the insight you will gain.

Answer each the following questions with one of three choices -- good enough, needs improvement, or hurting us:

- 1) In the customer's eyes we are leading all competition in understanding and addressing their future needs.
- 2) Our customers choose our products and services because we provide more value and higher quality than our competition does.

- 3) We are keeping our resources focused on the important things because we have very few distractions that divert key manager's time.
- 4) I know that our processes are effectively aligned to support our vision, mission, key values, key business objectives, and results measures.
- 5) Our processes effectively integrate to get maximum, focused value from our resources.
- 6) We aggressively seek to compare and to learn what other organizations may do better than we do.
- 7) We put considerable effort into developing and retaining a skilled, motivated, productive, and happy workforce to achieve extraordinary results.
- 8) We routinely achieve results that meet or exceed our strategic and tactical business objectives.

Now ask yourself 'how do I know' for each question. What process do you have in place that measures and supports your answer to the above? How do you collect the information, validate the information, analyze the information, process the information, and manage by the information? Too many leaders have to admit that they do not have the key measures or processes to really support their perceptions to these questions. This is your first look in the mirror.

Next, go out to your people – all of your people. Give them a presentation and interact with them on a topic that is of interest to them. Ask each person attending to give you two suggestions right then on something they would do or change to make things better if they could take that action right now. You do not need to know who provided the recommendations unless your people elect to put their name on the paper. Collect the suggestions before they leave the meeting area. Read every suggestion and summarize them. You will gain tremendous insight on areas within which you need to think, reflect, and dig further. These suggestions will hit right in the heart of your organization's culture, processes, people, and alignment. This is your second quick look in the mirror.

Make some changes immediately based on the input. Show your people you listen and changes can happen quickly.

Go out and ask all of your managers, supervisors, professionals, and as many employees as possible to list for you in writing the following. You may have to let the people submit this anonymously if there is questionable trust in your organization.

- 1) the top five roadblocks and barriers to getting things done
- 2) the first 3 changes they should make in their department
- 3) the first 3 changes they would make someplace else in the organization
- 4) the 2 things they would do immediately if they were king for a day in your organization and their action could not be undone
- 5) the top 3 concerns they have as an employee of your organization

- 6) a list of any perceived sacred cows or things that cannot be changed or touched
- 7) a list of any perceived double standards in the organization where people are not treated the same

Read and summarize all of the above. Categorize the input into culture, process, people, or alignment areas. This is your third quick look in the mirror.

Makes some changes immediately based on the input. Again show your people that you listen and changes can happen quickly.

Now you are armed with information to conduct a fast-paced, simulation exercise with a good cross section of your organization's leaders, natural leaders, hourly employees, bargaining employees, and professionals. You will not personally participate in the exercise but will engage a facilitator that has run an organization at least as large as yours to challenge and drive your people out of their comfort zone during the exercise. Your focus during this exercise will be to watch the group dynamics, thought processes, contributions, and basic skills to address a difficult problem. In less than 2 days you will gain tremendous additional insight into keys of what makes your organization tick or sputter...

The purpose of the simulation exercise is to quickly be able to determine how well your people understand your environment, products, customers, processes, bureaucracy, capabilities, barriers to progress, and what it takes to get something done. Many times people will see and understand only a small percentage of what must be done to take on something challenging. Time is a crutch. Normally meetings are scheduled days or weeks apart but no new, substantive information is obtained. Precious time is lost. In the simulation exercise your people must make decisions and sequentially act on those decisions. They quickly learn that you may not have all the information you maybe need or want but that is reality. People will soon learn the value of teamwork, diversity, and collaboration when they are accountable for making something happen in less than a perfect situation.

Pick a problem that could be real to the group and one that they have not tried to address. For example, the price on an item must be reduced at the actual cost level by 30% within 4 years. Your people can reduce cost by cutting cost, increasing revenues upon which overheads are charged, or other permeations and combinations. An agenda should be developed to challenge their skills and their business knowledge. Divide your people up into small working groups. Each group will provide answers to each exercise. Then all participants will discuss the input received and explained from each group and agree upon one response that best represents their collective knowledge and thinking. Your people will quickly see that not everyone sees things the same and that collaboration is a powerful tool to move forward.

You should answer questions like the following first and then compare your answers to the answers your simulation participants agreed upon. Set specific times for the working groups to answer within the group, discuss with all participants, and then collaborate to agree on their best response to tasks like the following:

- 1) Describe your competitive environment and its impact upon your organization.

- 2) List the three most important competitive variables for your organization to increase revenue. Rank the variables in highest to lowest order of importance. Determine key milestones. State in months how quickly these significant milestones can be achieved for each variable.
- 3) List the three most important specific actions that need to happen for each of the top four ranked competitive variables to increase revenue. Rank the actions in highest to lowest order of importance.
- 4) Using the collectively agreed upon top four ranked specific actions, give two examples that demonstrate your organization has accomplished such actions in the past 12 months.
- 5) Grade your organization using school grades (A,B, C, D, F) on each of the following:
  - a. Having the knowledge of what it takes and the competency to execute to compete and beat the best
  - b. Focus and knowledge-based strategy to increase revenues
  - c. Energized commitment to total quality excellence
  - d. Timely, aggressive, and consistent challenge to status quo that delivers results
  - e. Enthusiasm for rapid change
  - f. Total team orientation and absence of different functional or personal agendas
  - g. Communication with understanding on needs, strategy, and plan
  - h. Management leads by example and eliminates behavior inconsistent with performing at customer-acknowledged excellence levels
  - i. Sense of urgency and ability to get results for competitive variable #1
  - j. Sense of urgency and ability to get results for competitive variable #2
  - k. Sense of urgency and ability to get results for competitive variable #3
- 6) Describe in five bullet points or less, each bullet point six words or less, the specific challenge to your organization presented in this simulation
- 7) Provide the top three summary solutions (six words or less) of what needs to be done in order to meet the specific challenges.
- 8) List the top three barriers to these solutions
- 9) List the top five specific cost reduction opportunities and estimate the total dollar savings for each of the five opportunities. Rank the opportunities in importance from most important to least important.

10) To realize each opportunity, list the top three changes that must take place. Rank the changes in order of importance from most important to least important.

11) Make a pie chart to summarize the percentage of total cost reduction that would come from the special cost reduction opportunities. The initiatives must add up to meet the 30% reduction target and pie chart slices must add up to 100%.

12) Using the two biggest slices from the pie chart, prepare a top level project plan and time line, in three-month increments, beginning today, and indicate how much of your savings will be realized in each three-month period. The total savings must add up to the total saving projected on the pie chart for these two slices.

13) Group discussion on what was learned, what you did right, what you could improve, and action assignments.

This is your fourth look in the mirror. In an exercise like this, you would like more facts and more time. You will never have all the facts and you could always use more time. What is more important though is learning what and how your people think with what they know today. That is why all answers are short and concise. You get the point without the usual accompanying explanation, clarification, and caveats.

Don't be surprised if the discussions get lively. Don't be surprised to see suppressed feelings rise to the surface. Don't be surprised to see a lack of knowledge, skill, and basic understanding of issues and solutions. Don't be surprised to see right in the room some of your fundamental roadblocks and barriers to progress.

Seldom does a group of people get to work together on such a challenging and mentally stimulating exercise. Seldom do people at all levels of your organization get to appreciate what you do and the decisions you have to make as a leader. Seldom do you get the opportunity to get so much non-routine information and see your people under fire when decisions must be made and positions negotiated within short time periods.

It is time to reflect. Compare your answers to the simulation exercise with the answers of your people. What have you learned? Take time to think. Pull out your strategic and tactical objectives. Where do you have gaps in your processes? Where do you have alignment challenges? What do you need to adjust to address fundamental capability, training, hiring, behaviors, procedures, processes, systems, or approach? What performance measures do you need to put in place? What is your next step?

Take the challenge. The steps forward with your new information and perspective are fun and invigorating. Now you can see why it must be you. You have your hands on all the controls. Open up communication. Stop, look, listen, and learn together. Your people will be more ready to work together to get the important things done. You will be better able to lead and remove the roadblocks and barriers in their way. Your metrics will show your progress and encourage everyone. These and future looks in the mirror will pay tremendous benefits. Try it!