

The Future Of Leadership And Management In The 21st-Century Organization

THE LEADERSHIP and management needs of today's successful companies have changed. Here's why...

In slower moving and less complex business environments the old hierarchical model that depended mostly on only a few people at the top for leadership simply doesn't work anymore. In today's more volatile, uncertain and ambiguous business battlefield, decentralized controls and leadership through networks of people at all levels is imperative for success.

One person — or a few people — simply don't have the time or resources to sift through mounds of data about their company performance, industry, economic environment or competitors. Nor do they have the time to disseminate the right data to the right people in real time. Organizations move too quickly for that model to be effective.

In a recent article, I wrote about the fundamental difference between leadership and management as it relates to today's organizations facing the need for significant change. So what does leadership and management look like in the successful, growing and innovative 21st century organization? One easy correlation I can draw is from experiencing the leaner structures we had in the Navy SEAL teams. When you think military, most would picture an extremely bureaucratic command and control environment, which of course does still exist in today's armed forces. In some cases it's absolutely necessary. But in special operations, the pace at which we must move, learn and even change moves far too quickly for a traditional hierarchy.

The Naval Special Warfare community, where regular military rank of course exists, is still a much flatter organization. Senior leaders do the leading, while most of the important managerial tasks are delegated to the lower ranks. Junior team members are empowered with great deals of responsibility and the autonomy to make decisions. Is it always perfect? Of course not. But with a culture founded on trust and extreme levels of accountability, this teamwork mechanism works very well.

The same applies to today's business organizations. Especially in highly competitive environments. My previous company was a digital marketing agency. As the company grew rapidly, the industry continued to change due to technological advancements and the competitive landscape broadened, we knew our structures would have to evolve as well.

In some of the most successful start-ups and even large organizations that have evolved, you can visibly see greater levels of delegation and decision making at all levels. Leaders focus on guiding and communicating the vision, leading large client projects and finding new ways to develop their staff. Managers are taking on more leadership responsibilities and pass increasing amounts of responsibility to junior employees.

So what does this mean for leadership and management development? Management is more easily taught and learned in my opinion — planning, budgeting, staffing, quality control,

processes, systems, etc. Leadership is a different beast and very few companies are designed for powerful leadership development. Their structures aren't designed for it, they don't invest in it or don't see the need to prioritize it. Or all of the above. But if anything I have mentioned in this article is valid, then how can today's fast-paced organizations not find better ways to develop their leaders.

Most of us spend the majority of the time we are awake working. Unless of course you are retired or have actually found a way to be successful working four hours a week. Personally, I would go nuts. So for the rest of us normal people, we spend most of our time working - and in large part in some sort of office environment. Which means that the time we have available to develop as managers and leaders is limited. Why? Because we are extremely busy and usually not being measured on some elusive performance metric related to how well we "lead." So that means that if companies really want to move more quickly, have a flatter structure and develop emerging leaders from within, a significant amount of time must be spent teaching team members how to lead.

Unfortunately, just having someone come in and do a keynote presentation on leadership at the annual sales kick-off meeting isn't sufficient enough to immediately create an army of leaders who can effectively develop, communicate and execute a powerful vision — especially a vision for leading new changes. Nor is a two-day workshop. While these types of investments are important and should be made, the organizational structure and culture has to be one that empowers leaders. One that encourages people to take charge, attempt to lead, make mistakes and constantly learn.

Many newer companies and start-ups aren't burdened by the old ways of thinking and operating like organizations founded fifty years ago. That said, many companies that have been around a long time have seen the light and are leading major transformations that improve culture, performance and leadership structure. The big ego bosses and dictators with an underserved sense of self-worth are finding it harder to exist in these new environments. A few 360-degree reviews and peer evaluations can fix that really quickly. The younger generations in the workplace today aren't afraid to "share" their opinion. Especially when it's anonymous. Trust me!

And frankly, leaders and managers with that mindset aren't good for any organization. During SEAL training, peer reviews are a weekly event. We have a process called "top five, bottom five." Every week you anonymously rank the top five performers in the class as well as the bottom five. Much of the time, those landing in the bottom five are star performers — from a tactical or physical standpoint. But they have character or ego problems. These classmates are organically purged. This system roots those issues out before a student ever gets close to graduating. It's one of the many ways we protect our culture.

Nothing I have seen points to the fact that organizations will revert back to the old way of doing things — larger than life CEOs who single-handedly make a company great, thick layers of overpaid middle management, over-managed and under-led departments, and structures not designed to develop leaders.

Systems and cultures designed to develop new leaders and truly empower them is the key to success in any 21st century organization. The upside is almost endless. More people leading at a

lower payroll cost. More people who feel connected to their work that are inspired by those around them. More senior leaders actually getting to focus on visionary leadership rather than management. Easier succession planning because you don't have to spend months looking for one "Superwoman" who can allegedly do-it-all. The list goes on and on.

Does this easily apply to all organizations? Maybe not. But it does to any company I would want to build or work for.

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