

Leadership

You Just A'int That Good

I just “a'int that good” as a leader and manager. The difference between me and most leaders in this business, is that I know it. Not only do I know it, but I know exactly what “I'm not” and I'm working on fixing it. All the time. For more than fifteen years. Because this is what I owe my employees and the members.

How did this happen? A couple of decades of my personal leadership challenges. Eight years of all my staffers giving me annual anonymous 360 performance evaluations. Tons of hard questions I've asked my mentors and harder answers I received. Like a lot of you reading this, I used to think because I was in charge that I was good. I easily put my own opinion of me before the opinions of those that followed. I substituted drive and determination for effective leadership, strategy and maturity. I evaluated my leadership solely on business results instead of including people results. I could have rationalized any and all of it. But I'd be no further ahead now than I was ten or fifteen years ago.

Leaders are funny in that way. Most guys I know are focused on improving everything and everyone around them – except themselves. They stride the world confidently and arrogantly mostly blind to their own upside. Power, authority, status or wealth substitutes for a clear-eyed view of their strengths and deficiencies. Most guys spend more time playing golf each year than improving themselves. And their partners and senior managers do the same. And as a result they could be better. A lot better. And so could their business results.

I recall a discussion I had with a member some fifteen years ago that sums this up. This guy was doing maybe fifteen million a year and making a very good living. But he just wasn't that good. And it showed in his organization. And I told him so. The exact words I used were, “you run your company for shit.” After he calmed down we had a very detailed conversation where I made my case. I not only convinced him, but provoked him into a very intense personal and organizational development effort. He was honest enough and secure enough to take that “tough love” knowing I was not being judgmental but just blunt as hell. Ten years later I was awful proud of him when they hit a highly profitable eighty million. And he doesn't need to be there for the organization to succeed anymore. What's the point? That without brutal personal and organizational self-evaluation, you are unlikely to reach your personal leadership potential and thus your organization will underperform. Who better to tell you the truth than yourself?

Self Knowledge and Mastery: The Alpha Foundation

Self-knowledge and management is the foundation to successful long term leadership capability. Learning the external tips and tactics to manage others is fine. Getting your MBA is a plus. Officially becoming the foreman is terrific. But ultimately those are external enhancements to leadership capability right now. You have to look at leadership

development as a long term personal evolution, rather than a one time event (a promotion) or entitlement. Self knowledge would include the following;

- What are my main motivations good and bad?
- What are my main strengths and weaknesses in dealing with people?
- What is my fatal flaw and how does it impact people around me?
- What level of intuition do I bring to motivating others?
- What is my blind spot?
- Can I take brutally honest feedback in service of my advancement?
- Am I secure enough in myself to lead well?
- How do I generally behave under extreme stress?
- What am I going to do with this information and what resources or strategies am I going to use to improve my personal and organizational performance?

I have seen many leaders fall short of their potential because they would not or could not be honest with themselves. They make enough money. They are tired. They don't need it. They've heard it all before; been there and done that. They've paid their dues. But just as likely, they were simply unwilling to dig into the challenge of self knowledge and self development. And that is understandable. We often find more things we don't like about ourselves or our performance when we do it, WHICH IS PRECISELY WHY WE NEED TO DO IT. The polite term is self-deception. The true description is bullshitting yourself.

Tough markets usually provide the shock to the system necessary to re-evaluate people, procedures, markets and strategies. The same should apply to you and your leadership team. No matter what else you do, your organization will not reach it's profitability or growth potential until you put the money and effort into leadership development. Make this a priority for 2009. What got you here won't get you to where you want to be. And take it from one who knows. You just a'int that good. Yet.

Mark's Breslin's upcoming fourth book Alpha Dog: Leading and Motivating Yourself and Others. Will be coming from McAlly Press International, 2009. For a list of management and leadership development resources email Mark at mbreslin@euca.com.