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# Leadership

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## From the Editor

Who said this?

One of the greatest discoveries people make, one of their greatest surprises, is to find they can do what they were afraid they couldn't do. Most of the bars we beat against are in ourselves — we put them there, and we take them down.

- a) Nelson Mandella
- b) Henry Ford
- c) Stephen Covey
- d) Jim Cuddy

The observation talks about the wisdom of facing our fears, how we often defeat ourselves, and the importance of taking responsibility for removing those internal barriers to success. To my surprise, Henry Ford said it. I didn't realize he had those insights into human behaviour?

When we coach others, we take Ford's counsel seriously.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

## About the Author and the Article

In this edition, Stephen has 3 wishes for leaders. Each of those wishes are made because he has the feeling that leaders haven't been hearing him in these areas. As he puts it, wishing is an act of desperation. "I've done this because I have found myself despairing a bit about how leadership is done and I'd like to find better ways for moving organizations forward."

Those of you who are regular readers of this publication, have probably heard him talk about some of these wishes but he's decided to come at it yet again.

Stephen is a founder of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization that sponsors Management Perspectives.



*Stephen Baetz*

# A Leadership Wish-List

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Wishing is an act of desperation. It is what we do before we hope. Although I'm not sure I could make a solid distinction between wishing and hoping if I were pressed to do so. Wishing, it seems to me, is done with fingers crossed, brows knitted, and a forced half-smile. It is a type of secular prayer making, I suppose. We wish when we've tried everything that we can think of that's in our control and now we leave it to ... what? Fate, kismet, "the gods," the good graces of Chance. Hoping happens when wishing didn't appear to be enough and we now recognize the necessity of having a flicker of light when everything seems dark.

As much as I might try to make a distinction between the two, wishing and hoping have more in common than they have differences. When we don't have control over outcomes, when we've tried but failed, or when we are befuddled and thoroughly confused about what to do next, and when we are standing next to Desperation, we wish and hope. These are not futile or silly acts. Wishing and hoping have the potential to open our thinking and, by doing so, they help us find other ways out.

Over the last several years, I've developed a wish-list for leaders. I've done this because I have found myself despairing a bit about how leadership is done and I'd like to find better ways for moving organizations forward. (And quite honestly, when I've raised the issues in my wish-list I get surface agreement but no real commitment to do anything differently.) So here goes ... again.

## **I wish leaders would be as passionate about finding ground truth as they are in ensuring alignment.**

Leaders ought to worry about alignment for a couple of really good reasons. One, we don't live in a world of infinite resources so having parts of the organization pursuing an independent agenda can chew up human effort, time, and money. Two, employees and customers become confused when rogue departments are acting in counterpoint to the mission, the objectives, the brand, the strategies, or the plans. As a result, leaders

look for every chance they get to talk about how there has to be a clear connection from mission to vision to strategies to initiatives to operational plans to individual action.

Extraordinary effort is dedicated to creating and finding forums where senior leaders can recount the corporate agenda and make explicit appeals for alignment. I've observed in many organizations that templates have been created that oblige business units and teams to describe how what they are doing aligns with corporate strategies and initiatives. The teams that get resources are the ones that best demonstrate alignment.

Don't misunderstand me: encouraging alignment is more often than not a good idea.

My wish is that the same passion and energy were dedicated to finding out ground truth: that is, listening directly to what the people at the point of the spear are saying about the challenges they are facing in producing or delivering a product or service to a customer. Notice I've said listening *directly*. The listening has to be unfiltered by supervisors or middle managers who have vested interests and may, either wittingly or unwittingly, distort what is really being said. Of course, direct dialogue is not the only way to hear ground truth but it is required. Otherwise, leadership will live in a bubble that insulates them from real and present opportunities and problems. The net effect of that is that they can't make course corrections.

Gathering ground truth means that leaders should occasionally extricate themselves from their daily regime of meetings with like minded leaders to talk with front-liners at breakfast or over pizza. They should go to lunchrooms with brown bag in hand and just chat and listen to what's on people's minds about "how could we be doing a better job." The opponents of doing this will argue that people will be intimidated and won't "tell you the truth" or they will exaggerate and make an issue bigger than it is so they can "get your attention." Of course, these are the same challenges a leader encounters with only listening to middle managers and if they can sort out the wheat from the chaff there, they should be able to do

the same with front-liners who are at the edge of the organization. Besides, leaders are listening for patterns, not specific details of a single small incident. They are not there to find fault with their supervisors and take corrective action so they can be the hero who “finally got it done.” The intent is to understand the impacts of the decisions they have made so they can learn.

**I wish leaders would dedicate more time challenging complacency.**

The best time to make change is when you’re successful. And the most difficult time to make change is when you’re successful. As most leaders appreciate, the problem with success is that it creates satisfaction and contentment which are the anterooms to complacency.

There’s no doubt that leaders ought to be the first to congratulate and thank those who have contributed to the success that has been gained. The celebrations should be visible and genuine. Those same leaders should also be helping others understand that when you’re the best-in-class that’s the time you need to be rethinking how you do business and making changes that will ensure long-term success. If an organization rethinks its business when it’s at a point of crisis, the sense of urgency is high but the ability to think clearly and the ability to fund the change are limited.

As much as leaders understand that you change at the peak of your game, they are often reluctant to deliver what seems to be a double message. As one leader said to me, “How can I tell them today that they are great and tomorrow tell them that they are not good enough?” As a result, the we-must-be-better-tomorrow message is left unsaid and self-satisfaction, comfort, and complacency set in.

**I wish for a better balance between long-term and short-term.**

By the time you reach a more senior leadership position you should have had a couple of economic cycles under your belt: enough to tell you that recovery does happen (the only

difference has been how long it takes). Short-term thinking is to cut anything that has long-term impact. You guessed it: strategic planning, coaching, learning and development, and employee engagement (to name a few) are reduced to former shadows of themselves. No wonder employees become cynical about the leadership speeches which declare they are the difference makers and at the heart of success.

When recovery has occurred, re-investment in those areas is restored. However, it is not as simple as flipping a switch. Credibility and trust have to be rebuilt and often new people hired into those positions. A couple of years of solid work are done before the cycle repeats itself. No wonder those areas are rarely seen as organizational strengths. More often than not, they are derided by others as merely cost-centres rather than value-centres.

Which takes me to the last wish.

**I wish leaders would keep their eyes on the game and how it is being played.**

And the completion to that assertion is rather than on the scoreboard.

There are breaks in the action when scoreboard results can be reviewed and corrections can be made. My feeling is that too many leaders are obsessed by results (perhaps because that’s how they are compensated) and don’t have enough dialogue with themselves and others about how the game is being played: “How well are we executing on the commitment we’ve made to our customers and to ourselves?” If that question (and others like it) were asked regularly and answered honestly, the score would take care of itself.

That question pleads for after-action-reviews to happen, for course corrections to be made, for new insights to be articulated and circulated.

Keeping your eye on the game, will create a learning culture — something that many leaders say they want but few make real because they are often too busy reacting to a single score and not making enough time to understand the flow of the game.

# There's More Where This Came From

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