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Leadership

From the Editor

How many times have you heard someone begin a sentence with these words: I only wish ... ? I'm curious about how the sentence ends. Sure enough, I want to know what the wish is but I also want to see if there is really only one wish. My experience is that wish-lists are lengthy and, more often than not, riddled with hidden insinuations about what somebody else should be doing to make things better.

Of course wishful thinking that waits for others may only be useful as a way to pass time. However, wishful thinking could be a useful activity if it helps us imagine the future and see what the possibilities are.

At LIVE Consultants we engage our clients in useful wishful thinking. The result? Plans — either strategic or operational — which are both imaginative and helpful.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

There's an enduring observation that goes like this: Always make a problem simple but no simpler than it really is. It's solid advice, especially for those who are prone to suffer from analysis paralysis.

In this edition, Stephen looks at what a leader might do when the challenges that are in front of them *are* complex and there are competing drivers or agendas; those situations that can't be made simple. He offers four suggestions. None of them make a complex situation simpler. Rather they help leaders engage others in the complexity that does exist.

Stephen Baetz is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

What's a Leader to Do?

I'm always amazed at what sticks. With all the trivia, commentary, annotations, and speculative observations that pass by me in a day, why is it that some of it stays with me and other stuff is purged within days, if not minutes? Perhaps it has to do with relevance; I keep what I think is useful and dispense with what I think has little or no utility. Or maybe it has to do with quirkiness; a collection of oddities can always be thumbed through like a family album for the sake of nostalgia and a few good laughs.

It has to be at least two decades ago when a colleague started talking to me about a reticular activator: the part of your brain that starts noticing things once you are aware of them. Heard the word *bravura* and didn't know what it meant? Now you do and you can't go a day without hearing the word. Reticular activator as a reference has stuck with me like nettles to wool socks.

What has my reticular activator been up to lately? Stories of street tyranny. It started a couple of months ago when a senior executive talked with me at length about the challenges of freeing up money for innovation. "We've got to deliver the numbers to the street as promised," she said, "or they will punish us." A few days later, in another organization, the executive was lamenting the fact that the analysts who weren't on his payroll had more influence on how money got spent in the organization than the leadership team that was running the business. "And then," he added, "we hit the number that the institutional investors set as their max and they bail." Similar stories have paraded past me every week for the last eight.

The essential questions at the heart of the stories are these:

- ✓ How do you protect the present and prepare for the future at the same time?
- ✓ How do you balance immediacy with possibilities?
- ✓ What is the role of a leader when there are multiple competing agendas?

Answering the questions with a shrug or some version of "That's why they pay you the big bucks" is neither satisfying for them or for

me. So having considered the questions over the past several weeks, I now offer several observations to the broad question of "What's a leader to do?"

Suggestion #1: Remind yourself that the challenges of the business are complex.

Few big opportunities, few big problems at a senior level have single stakeholders or are uni-dimensional. If it seems that there is only one, or the answer is exceedingly easy, the chances are that the opportunity or problem has been defined too simply. Shareholders' interests will always play off the interests of employees, customers, consumers, and suppliers; efficiency will play against quality, waste, safety, and risk. Security competes with privacy, honesty with discretion, ambition with collaboration, stability with change.

Given that that is the case, the action that we take as leaders can't be simple. To choose one side in a complex problem will give temporary relief, sure enough, but it will also give the organization long-term heartburn. For example, imagine if you surrendered to the 90-day thinking of the street (always robbing long-term initiatives to fund quarterly profits) and never invested in the future. The street is happy for the moment but you may not have a viable company in the longer term. And likewise, if you only focus on the longer term and not on present profitability, you may not have enough resources to build a better organization.

Insist that all complex problems and opportunities are described in complex ways.

Suggestion #2: Focus the organization on several fronts.

Avoid the easy on-off, this/that choices that often happen when there is a single, strong stakeholder or driver. Using our example, focus the organization so it takes action relative to the immediate demands; *and* focus the organization so it ensures the future is taken care of. In other situations, find ways to respond to the needs of customers *as well as*

employees or develop ways to maximize profit *and* minimize impact on the environment.

When you do this, you can be guaranteed that the noise level will increase. A myriad of voices will emerge which declare that “life is about making choices,” that “we don’t have the resources,” and that “we just don’t have the bandwidth.” Signal that you hear the concerns and that they are legitimate (after all who can argue with the virtue of staying focused and the wisdom of not burning out individuals). And then invite everyone to be ingenious about how two or three seemingly divergent agendas could be served at the same time.

The experience of organizations that are dedicated to continuous improvement indicates that efficiency and quality can be achieved at the same time. Concern for the environment (using fewer resources or minimizing waste) can be profitable. There are ample examples to illustrate that it is possible to serve several agendas at the same time. But it does take people to be inventive, novel, and clever.

As much as you invite people to be innovative, create the environment where that can happen by providing frequent communication about why it is important to the business and by offering ample dollops of recognition when people do find new ways.

Suggestion #3: Provide reasons and clarity.

This suggestion is obviously a close companion to the previous one. Some of the best leaders that I have observed have a remarkable ability to take complex issues and make them understandable. Which doesn’t mean they dumb down the challenges or establish a single focus. What they do is make sense of what is happening; they illustrate the various pushes and pulls that exist; they point out the risks of making things too simple.

In large measure those leaders accomplish this by doing four things.

First they talk about the issues from the vantage point of those people whose hearts and minds they want to engage. Shareholder value is not usually compelling (unless everyone owns shares) but our collective

prosperity and providing exciting work for everyone is.

Second, they communicate frequently. Simple challenges and issues may merely require a one-time-only communication; complex messages require frequency. Leaders should not only use every chance they get to communicate about the challenges, they should make opportunities to talk with every function and at every level. The rule of thumb is this: communicate until you can’t be misunderstood and then communicate some more.

Third, they increase the number of times face-to-face communication occurs. Face-to-face communication is the most trusted. People can see your passion; they can hear your sense of urgency; and people can feel that a personal invitation has been extended to them to find better ways to serve multiple agendas.

And finally, they ensure that all members of the leadership team are delivering the same messages. Having everybody on the same page is essential when the message is difficult. If individuals listening to the message want to take themselves “off the hook” all they have to do is identify the differences between leaders; “If and when they ever figure out what they want, then I’ll get on board.” Message integrity is essential.

Suggestion #4: Keep at it.

Nothing worth doing ever gets done with little effort. Nor does it get done the first time you put your mind to it. Leadership requires persistence and particularly when the issues are complex and there are competing drivers.

Developing double or triple vision (seeing the present and the future at the same time or requiring efficiency, quality, and reduced waste as examples) doesn’t come easily. Individuals who are frustrated may go back to a simpler way of doing things. At these times, leaders must persist and declare that a win hasn’t happened until double vision has occurred and the organization has developed an ability to move several agendas at the same time.

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