

Leading From Behind

Leading from behind forms the foundation of trust through its basic principles of shepherding, humility, collective vision, and seeing beyond the surface of an individual's potential. These principles support strong, loyal teams.

Stepping back to take charge? It seems risky and definitely goes against the grain of the predominant “get out in front as fast as you can” business culture. Yet truly great leaders understand this concept of leading from behind and leverage it to develop loyal, driven leadership teams that are equipped to carry out an organization's mission for long-term sustainability.

It isn't an easy pill to swallow. For example, consider the successful entrepreneur who built a company from the ground up into a leader in its marketplace. As the rightful keeper and manager of the knowledge, relationships, blood, sweat, and tears that drove this upward momentum, the entrepreneur is naturally inclined to cling to maintaining control of the operations that made the company successful.

Managing quality decision making might seem like a wise choice as opposed to the risky move of trusting others with the limelight of leadership. On its face, allowing

others to control the helm might seem dangerous because mistakes could translate to a new, uncharted direction. This thought, however, is where the misconception lies when the model is to lead from behind.

Leading from behind doesn't mean relinquishing control. Rather it unites younger, less experienced leaders around a common vision to equip them to produce the best possible outcome. Under this leadership model, teams share ownership and accountability for success. By aligning the leadership with employees for a clear vision that allows them to work together to develop a clear strategy for reaching goals, the end result is a stronger, more loyal team that celebrates the success of the company over any one person's agenda.

Consider some basic principles of this model and their merits.

Shepherding

Nelson Mandela understood the concept of shepherding and specifically pointed out in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, that a shepherd “stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.”

Much more than teaching,

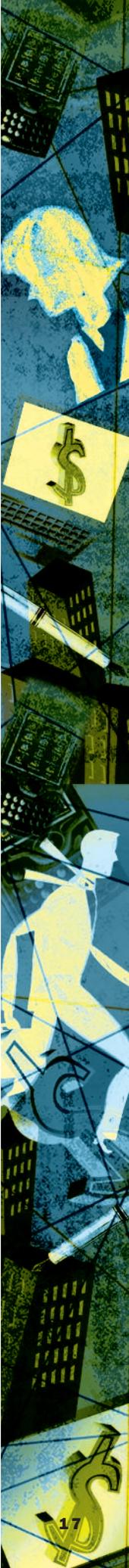
shepherding gives others a platform to both lead and make mistakes. It allows individuals to recognize human imperfection as a reality and missteps as opportunities for growth, which can lead to something better.

Shepherding takes the concept of coaching and mentoring to the next level and actually reduces risk from the big picture perspective of leadership development. By walking alongside another and working collaboratively toward successful development, a shepherd is more apt to develop leaders who align with an organization's vision.

With this role comes a great responsibility to lead by example, and great leaders understand that character has a trickle-down effect in any organization. Those who shepherd others are in it for the long haul, developing an atmosphere of trust and encouragement.

Humility

Some of the most powerful CEOs today understand that getting others to follow a vision starts with a bottom-up perspective. That means getting in the trenches in order to listen to frontline employees and understand the challenges they face. Having humility means you admit mistakes, are



open to other people's ideas, give credit where credit is due, and celebrate the success of others.

Humble leaders are often compared to doormats that others walk all over, but that's far from an accurate depiction. Leaders who exhibit a true measure of humility put the organization's agenda above their own. Characterized by objective determination, these leaders lack egos that desire the spotlight. They instead shift the spotlight to work for the good of the mission, desiring to build something greater than their own personal goals.

The concepts of transparency and humility go hand in hand. Executives who approach leadership development with humility understand that the transparency of all company activities builds trust, which leads to fostering honest, open teams. This trait trickles down to all areas of business, from employee-to-employee interactions to dealings with customers to establishing partnerships or acquiring new opportunities.

Collective Vision

Today's employees want to be valued. The best way to align a leadership team with company goals is to value their contributions to building a vision. Those who have invested time and energy into an organization's purpose will be much more likely to see it through to a successful outcome.

Collective vision also lays the foundation for innovation and creativity. Consider that the very definition of innovation goes against the concept of a single person's vision. To produce something that's truly original, a company must consider that an accurate road

map for success probably hasn't been defined yet but will be the outgrowth of trial and error that involves a combination of successes and failures.

Great leaders recognize and acknowledge that the next "big idea" will most likely be the culmination of many good ideas. Consider the success of most Pixar movies, which represent a collective effort that draws on the genius and imagination of many to deliver something truly original in the marketplace.

Seeing Beyond the Surface

Never underestimate the "unqualified." We all have imperfections. When employees are guided to use their imperfections to serve the greater good of the enterprise, those "flaws" become assets. In many instances, those employees who seem most qualified for leadership development may be the wrong choices for long-term sustainability.

Consider that the person with charm, charisma, and all the right connections may make an impact in the short term, but if that individual isn't a team player, the charm wears off quickly and the leader's charisma dissipates within the team. Ambition can be a positive trait when directed to the greater vision of an organization, but sometimes hiring the most driven, talented professional whose number one interest is self-promotion can lead to costly employee turnover and overwhelming expense.

Longevity and loyalty are ranked high as characteristics of successful strategies that prepare the next generation to take leadership roles. Choose from the pool of leaders who desire first to be

part of an organization's mission and character and then allow the process of shepherding to better hone their leadership skills.

Leading in Small Businesses

Many start-up companies begin as very lean operations with a handful of people in executive leadership positions and just enough support staff to keep moving forward. For this reason, leadership must often wear many hats and may be pulled in many directions. For instance, a CEO may be responsible for not only the company's vision but also finance, operations, and business development functions.

While this scenario may be necessary to keep a start-up company in the black initially, it won't position a business for long-term growth and success. As the business begins to build, increasingly more will be required from the handful of executive leadership available to propel a business forward, often equating to significant time spent away from a headquarters operation.

It's critical that a CEO or business owner leverage a "leading from behind" business model during this early growth phase in order to quickly identify next-generation leaders who can begin to pick up key functions as new opportunities for the company emerge. This strategy is especially critical as a company makes its initial foray into the market because first impressions can be a make-or-break element to success.

By empowering a team to begin taking on more responsibility, natural leaders will begin to emerge, and the process of shepherding

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can be put into action. As missteps are made, executive leadership can quickly redirect new leadership to better choices and methods.

Open lines of communication regarding process improvement must be maintained between the owners and the new leaders so employees don't fear the repercussions of errors. When mistakes are covered up, the end result is a lack of growth on the part of the new leadership and an atmosphere that doesn't foster collective vision.

Successful Leaders

The greatest leaders are servants within the organizations they lead. They understand that uniting an organization toward a common vision begins with trust, and trust begins with the belief that the leader has others' best interests at the core of the company's agenda.

Leading from behind forms the foundation of this trust through its basic principles of shepherding, humility, collective vision, and seeing beyond the surface of an individual's potential. Executives who are willing to step back from the elitist culture of top brass within many companies will be best positioned to build deep, loyal teams for the long-term success of an organization. **SF**

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