

Business Manager

Vol. 18 No. 3 September, 2015 Single Copy ₹ 100/-

Making HR People Complete

A photograph of a spider on its web, centered in the upper right quadrant of the cover. The web is illuminated with a greenish-yellow glow against a dark background.

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Organizations are expected to be many things in today's times. They need to be nimble, agile, collaborative, with multi skilled manpower, etc. The ask is multifold. Therefore, successful business leaders must shape their organizations to be flexible, less hierarchical, and more networked-in short, better organized to deliver value.



To WIN or LEARN!

Aparna Sharma

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Now, much more than ever "Change is the only constant." Today's business environment is marked by change, complexity and multiculturalism- yet, it is extremely exciting, challenging and is constantly evolving. The way in which we work has changed dramatically - virtual teams are commonplace, allowing little face-to-face interaction with the people we manage or report to who are based in other countries. Regardless of where our headquarters or domestic offices are located, we interact with global customers and our teams are staffed with international colleagues. Furthermore, our companies are frequently involved in the challenging process of absorbing competitors, being acquired, or being responsible for complicated reorganizations across global borders. These situations lead to management and communication challenges.

Organizations are expected to be many things in today's times. They need to be nimble, agile, collaborative, with multi skilled manpower, etc. The demand is multifold. Successful business leaders must shape their organizations to be flexible, less hierarchical, and more networked-in short, better organized to deliver value.

Today's leaders are already facing challenges and changes that are rapidly transforming where, how, and with whom they do business. Leaders who are adapting their strategies are merely keeping pace with change. A more strategic view of agility is about leaders anticipating trends and proactively defining innovative strategies.

In order to anticipate and seize opportunities to drive business success, leaders will need to demonstrate different set of behaviors. Organizations need to build a strong leadership pipeline that demonstrates the right competencies. Because of the shrinking talent pool, organizations

must build their own leadership pipeline from within.

The four essentials

Every business leader today needs to be equipped with four basis essentials in order to improve the way they do business - agility, authenticity, talent, and sustainability.

Agility is an essential competency for leaders. Given the speed of change, those who have the foresight to spot change on the horizon, anticipate what comes next, and take the lead in developing future strategies to address evolving market demands will make it to the winning league.

Authenticity is a vital leadership competency in a changing business environment. Leaders need to create clarity-articulate a compelling vision and paint a realistic picture of the future. With so many changing variables, they must lead with confidence and have the courage to take a stand. To build trust and confidence with their teams, they need to be genuine in their communications. With change creating anxiety and confusion, leaders must bring a level of certainty about the path forward and foster a sense of purpose for their teams.

Talent is about a leader's ability to leverage and maximize the impact of his or her people. To harness the power of their people assets, leaders must be committed to building a supportive culture and effective organizational structures and people processes. Organizations that have not proactively developed talent-who lack the right people skilled in the right areas, when and where they're likely to be needed- are more vulnerable to rapid change. Leaders need to attentively develop, engage, and motivate people. They must be mindful about embedding day-to-day coaching and mentoring into the culture.

Sustainability is about demonstrating social responsibility by balancing business results with concern for the greater good. Although much attention is being paid to how companies deal with environmental issues, social responsibility extends beyond just this one area. Focusing on sustainability means looking beyond short-term results. It means considering the longer-term implications of decisions as they relate not just to the environment, but also to health, safety, and other areas of concern. It means taking actions that go beyond regulations to build controls into the business environment—embedding social responsibility into business processes and procedures and taking responsibility for the impact decisions might have on the workforce. Sustainability will be a major differentiator for a leader's success in the future. Ultimately, it may contribute to the long-term survival of an organization and serve to reshape the business climate.

One of the key trends in the business environment has been the rapidly increasing interaction, and even convergence, between three sets of institutions in society: business, government and NGOs. This is not a natural coming together as these groups often have very different motivations and objectives, which sometimes clash.

The contemporary business leader has to develop a capacity to engage with multiple constituencies beyond traditional organisational boundaries. Some are leading collaboratively with industry competitors, NGOs and government where challenges need to be tackled and only collective, systemic solutions will do. These important changes in the scope of their work involve:

- ◆ Contributing to public debate with an informed point of view
- ◆ Proactively leading change in consumer and supplier behaviour, industry norms and government policy.
- ◆ Relating well with multiple constituencies.
- ◆ Engaging in dialogue to understand and empathise with groups and communities with perspectives contrary to one's own.
- ◆ Collaborating through multi-stakeholder initiatives with unconventional partners

Our conventional mindset of connecting leadership with individual heroes displaying aggressiveness, strength, drive, ambition and self-reliance needs to make way for valuing leadership that is collective and cooperative and focuses on asking the right questions rather than having all the answers.

Develop learning agility

For the HR fraternity in particular, developing leadership across all levels of organisations is absolutely critical so that organisations can adapt and change. However, the biggest challenge is posed by the deep power structures in organizations and society which make it difficult for people without formal authority to take up leadership.

Another requirement is to develop learning agility in the rapidly changing business context. Organizational learning is a priority for

maintaining and increasing the firm's performance and competitiveness. This needs to be embedded in the organisation's culture.

Some, for instance, believe that behavioural change is required for learning; others insist that new ways of thinking are enough. Some cite information processing as the mechanism through which learning takes place; others propose shared insights, organizational routines, even memory.

To put it simply, a learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. Thus, new ideas are essential for learning is to take place. Sometimes they are created de novo, through flashes of insight or creativity; at other times they arrive from outside the organization or are communicated by employees themselves. Whatever their source, these ideas are the trigger for organizational improvement. But they cannot by themselves create a learning organization.

Learning organizations are skilled at five main activities: systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from their own experience and past history, learning from the experiences and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization. Each is accompanied by a distinctive mind-set, tool kit, and pattern of behaviour. Many companies practice these activities to some degree. By creating systems and processes that support these activities and integrate them into the fabric of daily operations, companies can manage their learning more effectively. For instance, study of best practices leading to enthusiastic borrowing is replacing the "not invented here syndrome". Customising them in the context of industry and workforce makes them "ready-to-use", rather than spending time on reinventing the wheel.

Organizational learning can usually be traced through three overlapping stages. The first step is cognitive. Employees are exposed to new ideas, expand their knowledge, and begin to think differently. The second step is behavioural. Employees begin to internalize new insights and alter their behaviour. And the third step is performance improvement, with changes in behaviour leading to measurable improvements in results: superior quality, better delivery, increased market share, or other tangible gains. Because cognitive and behavioural changes typically precede improvements in performance, a complete learning audit must include all three.

A comprehensive learning audit also measures performance and helps to establish that cognitive and behavioural changes have actually produced results. Without them, companies would lack a rationale for investing in learning and the assurance that learning was serving the organization's ends.

As we all know, learning organizations are not built overnight. Most successful examples such as GE, Pfizer, etc., areas a result of consistent hard work, top management commitment, changing mindsets and management processes that have accrued slowly and steadily over time. However, some changes can be worked upon immediately.

Transform in to a learning organization

Here are a few steps to help you and your organization to transform into a learning organisation which is inescapably the need of the hour.

The first step is to foster an environment that is conducive to learning. There must be time for reflection and analysis, to think about strategic plans, dissect customer needs, assess current work systems, and invent new products. Learning is difficult when employees are rushed. If senior management explicitly frees up employees' time for the purpose does learning occur. That time will be doubly productive if employees possess the skills to use it wisely. Training in brainstorming, problem solving, analytical thinking etc. is therefore essential.

Another powerful lever is to open up boundaries and stimulate the exchange of ideas. Boundaries inhibit the flow of information; they keep individuals and groups isolated. Opening up boundaries, with conferences, meetings, and project teams, which go across organizational levels or link the company with its customers and suppliers, ensures a fresh flow of ideas and the chance to consider competing perspectives. General Electric CEO, Jack Welch considered this to be such a powerful stimulant of change that he has made "boundarylessness" a cornerstone of the company's strategy in the 1990s.

Once managers have established a more supportive, open environment, they can create learning forums. These are programs or events designed with explicit learning goals in mind, and they can take a variety of forms: strategic reviews, which examine the changing competitive environment and the company's product portfolio, technology, and market positioning; systems audits, which review the health of large, cross-functional processes and delivery systems; internal benchmarking reports, which identify and compare best-in-class activities within the organization; study missions, which are dispatched to leading organizations around the world to better understand their performance and distinctive skills; and symposiums, which bring together customers, suppliers, external experts, or internal groups to share ideas and learn from one another.

Each of these activities fosters learning by requiring employees to wrestle with new knowledge and consider its implications. Each can also be tailored to business needs. A consumer goods company, for instance, might sponsor a study mission to Europe to learn more about distribution methods within the unified Common Market, while a technology company might launch a systems audit to review its new product development process. Together, these efforts help to eliminate barriers that impede learning and begin to move learning higher

on the organizational agenda. They also suggest a subtle shift in focus, away from continuous improvement towards commitment to learning.

However, learning cannot be confused with leadership development. Learning is a sum of many parts, while leadership development, talent management, culture building, capability building, leveraging technology are some of the important parts. If leadership development is not embedded under learning and treated & managed separately- there will be confusion in the organisation and may also be duplication of efforts.

Adopt diversified performance measurement system

Now coming to measuring performance, we all know that traditional performance measurement systems with only financial parameters no longer provide sufficient information on the organization's success in the global market. Many companies have responded to the challenges in the global market and adopted a performance measurement system that reflects the changes in this competitive environment.

While adopting a more diversified performance measurement system, it is imperative that the new system reflects organization strategy, the perceived environmental uncertainty and organization structure. This is necessary to increase performance competence. Performance competence as a concept was introduced by Nanni et al., (1992). Simply put, it suggests that to be competent, a performance measurement system should measure what is important for the organization and that the measures should correspond to its context. Thus, performance competence is increased if the firms alter and adopt a performance measurement system linked to organization strategy.

It has become clear for all business leaders over the past decade that there are a host of new social, political, cultural and environmental issues and trends in the external business environment that will have a substantial impact on companies, whether in terms of risks or opportunities or both. They range from the shift to a low carbon economy and resource scarcity to globalisation and issues of poverty and human rights.

Given the complexities to deal with, today's leaders need to manage the present day organizations with renewed energy armed with new competencies and capabilities in their quiver with a eye on the future. The talent, processes and organisational agenda need to be future ready while delivering current business results.

The race is on- those leaders and organisations who will ride the wave of change, shall survive and thrive; while others will struggle and eventually perish.

The choice is entirely ours- whether to WIN or LEARN! **BM**

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