

## Addressing the Leadership Crises: Clarifying Leaders' Responsibilities

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The Elliot Leadership Institute at Johnson and Wales University conducted a study of 208 executives and presented their findings in a report -- "The Next Generation of Leadership" (2003). They revealed that Corporate America is in the midst of a leadership crisis and that the training industry is not providing managers with the tools they need to become effective leaders. This is a bit surprising given there is so much interest in leadership development and the large amount of leadership training being offered today. Following are leadership training programs that are commonly taught to today's aspiring leaders:

- Coaching/Mentoring
- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Executive Training
- Leadership Styles
- Manager/Supervisor
- Strategic Planning
- Team Building
- Time Management

The question arises though, why these packages? In their book *The Leadership Challenge*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner list 20 characteristics that others look for in leaders, the top seven of which are: Honesty, Forward-looking, Inspiring, Competent, Fair-minded, Supportive, and Broad-minded. When you consider what people want from their leaders, the leadership programs listed above do not address these characteristics to any significant degree.

Perhaps the reason for the popularity of these programs is based on corporate needs, rather than on the needs of individuals. At first glance, this appears a feasible assumption. It is understandable that organizations would want their leaders to understand communication, team building, conflict resolution and all of the other things being taught. But if this is true, why do so many organizations feel that they have a leadership crisis?

### Setting the Stage

There is a difference between a manager and a leader. We have all heard the cliché that managers do things right, and leaders do the right things. It bears repeating here. A leader is expected to do the right thing both by his superiors and by those whom he leads. Doing the right thing is more than a matter of integrity; it is the ability to make a decision that also makes sense for the organization. Many executives may feel they have a leadership crisis because they do not have the confidence that their leaders, while doing things right, will do the right thing.

## **Responsibility as the Answer**

As a leader, doing the right thing hinges on understanding what is expected of you at any given moment in time for any given situation. For example, a manager is dealing with a client who is arguing for added benefits that were not originally in the contract. One of the organization's values is customer satisfaction. How far can the manager go in making this client happy? Obviously every situation is different, but if the manager has to call someone else for advice, he/she has not been adequately trained to make the right decision. How can an organization help train its leaders in making the right decisions? The answer lies in helping them understand their responsibilities.

## **Responsibility towards the Organization**

A leader would have nothing to lead were it not for the organization. A leader must understand that, inherent in the position of leadership, is the responsibility of doing what is best for the organization. In today's society that emphasizes "me first," it is critical that we develop a culture where your leaders understand that they have responsibilities to the organization. If your leaders are not willing to behave in a manner that shows responsibility to the organization, you will never have confidence in them to do the right thing.

Successful companies develop a culture that teaches their leaders what it means to "belong." Companies such as IBM, Intel, General Electric, and EDS all have done a great job of building a culture where people know what is expected of them. While these companies are corporate giants, you don't have to be big to develop a culture. Every business, even the smallest, has a culture.

## **Responsibility towards Others**

A leader is also responsible for the well being of others placed in his or her care. People may attend training such as team building, conflict resolution, or communication -- but if an individual doesn't have a heart for people, he or she is not a true leader. True leaders feel a sense of responsibility for those placed in their charge. It is one thing to go through a team building exercise because you have to, it is quite another one to have a zeal and passion for building an environment where a team can perform to its utmost potential. Studies have repeatedly shown that people respond better when they know that someone cares about them.

Feeling a responsibility towards others does not mean being a "softy," but rather doing the best thing for an individual in whatever situation they may find themselves in. A great example can be found in downsizing. If a company must downsize in order to survive, the difference between a leadership driven company and a management driven company is in how people are treated during this process. Are people treated compassionately, given severance packages, notified with a reasonable amount of time - or are they given their last paycheck and immediately escorted off the premises with no advance notice?

## **Responsibility for Your Actions**

As leaders, we have strayed dangerously away from taking responsibility for our actions. In Feudal Japan during the era of the Samurai, the art of Seppuku was practiced. Seppuku restored the Samurai's honor after an act of cowardice or irresponsibility. It included disemboweling oneself with a short sword in a ritualized ceremony.

While I would not want to see us practicing Seppuku to atone for our lack of honor or success, I do think leaders need to take responsibility for their actions. It is imperative that we, as leaders, recognize and accept the responsibility for an error, even though it may not have directly been our fault. In a poor performing company, it is easy to point to the economy, environmental factors, corporate politics, or a previous administration for poor results. Yet, aren't those the things we get paid to find solutions for as a leader?

This type of responsibility is what separates a leader from a manager. A manager will say, "I did my best and life goes on." A leader will say, "I did my best, and here is how I would like to take responsibility for my actions."

## **How To Teach Responsibility**

Responsibility cannot be taught in the classroom alone. It requires a deep level of commitment by the organization and requires extensive resources beyond traditional training. Many companies try to teach leadership in the classroom, only to find that they have produced managers who do things right but cannot be trusted to make the right decisions. Teaching responsibility starts at the top and flows outward and downward until it permeates throughout the heart of an organization.

The first step in bringing responsible leadership to an organization is to assess the extent of responsible behavior at the executive level. This can be done using simple survey tools and cultural assessment techniques. Once deficiencies are identified, the executive staff would go through a program to help them develop responsibility in the three categories defined earlier: Organizational, Personal and Towards Others. This process can be expected to take 6 to 12 months or longer, depending upon the result of the assessments.

As the executive staff is undergoing responsibility development, a concurrent assessment should be done of the entire organization. This assessment would examine how leaders are identified, promoted, trained, and compensated. In addition, the leaders themselves would go through an assessment to determine how responsible they are in the three key areas.

Once completed, a program should be developed that rewards people who act responsibly. This may mean changing many of the current processes and procedures in place such as core values, compensation, promotion opportunities and job descriptions. This could require a few years to implement in its entirety. This is a daunting task and is the reason why many companies do not undertake it. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut to teaching responsibility. The sooner you decide to bite the bullet and take a hard look at this within your organization, the sooner you will be moving towards developing leaders who understand responsibility and who you can count on to not only do things right, but to do the right thing.