

Overmanaged and Underled?

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Too many corporations today are overmanaged and underled. If they are going to have a sustainable future, they must develop the capability of individuals across the organisation to exercise leadership more effectively.

Where have these essential skills gone? And how can they be reinstated?

Out of focus, and out of touch

In the last two decades, companies have directed a great deal of their resources towards enhancing information technology, improving quality systems and speeding the pace of their innovation, demand and supply chain processes.

The investment in these enablers was justified by the belief – and some evidence – that process efficiency and effectiveness would allow a sizeable reduction of non-value-added activity.

However, the focus on technology enablement led to neglect of other key enablers of innovation, efficiency and effectiveness: i.e. face to face communication and personal networking. In extreme cases, they have been positively discouraged. E-mail, for example has eliminated the need for people to talk to each other at all.



So exchanging messages has replaced proper discussion and debate. And integrated enterprise resource planning systems and processes have become a substitute for sound business decision-making. People are drowning in too much data, and struggling to turn it into information – let alone communicate it in a constructive and engaging way to people who should act on it.

In addition, lack of personal contact between different arms of an organisation has reduced people's understanding of important regional, national and cultural differences. There is often a strong belief that any business solution that works at Head Office is applicable anywhere else in the world, if you just follow the instructions.

As a result, most non-value-added activity today is, in fact, caused by poor communication skills and bad decision-making.

Quite simply, we have lost touch with each other. As leaders we spend much more time in the office or in hotel rooms, working with our beloved laptops, than we devote to truly communicating and engaging with people.

E-mail can impart information quickly. But this is not the same as getting people truly involved and aligned on important decisions that need to be made and actions that need to be taken. All too often e-mail delays or even prevents necessary decisions being taken, as people put off the unpleasant or difficult by sending interim responses to other people's input.

Engaging the organisation

Leaders need to be much more than information or task managers. They need to engage the organisation by involving people at every level in how they can contribute personally to the company's future – an aligned and motivated workforce is what makes the difference today for companies looking for

unique competitive sustainability. We can all 'buy' technology and processes but you cannot 'buy' sound change leadership skills. This takes time and requires senior management's personal effort and development.

It is disturbing to see how often Boards of Directors in multinationals 'decide the future', and then feel they have done their job. Few can see how weak the process is in their organisation for translating their decisions into something the local operations can work with. Even fewer realise that a major part of their job is training senior managers across the globe as to what the strategy means in **their** business environment, and **their** culture.

How much time do managers in your organisation spend talking with their people about the 'why' rather than the 'what', 'how' or 'when' things must get done?

Yet experience has shown time and again that telling people what to do is highly unlikely to result in their best performance; as individuals, we need to be able to identify the personal contribution we can make within the overall scheme of things, and be given the opportunity to make that contribution to the best of our ability.

This is not a 'new' role for leadership. Though sidelined recently, it is actually as old as the human race. And it demands several strengths. It is not enough to be inspiring and charismatic. Nor is it enough to be technically excellent.

Good leaders spend time and effort on personal, face-to-face communication and dialogue. This requires courage, as well as intelligence. It requires the ability to listen, and the ability to explain the same thing in a multitude of different ways. To understand the other person's perspective and needs, as well as fully understanding your own.

Unfortunately, most of us have been educated and trained to manage complexity; to plan, analyse, solve problems, meet objectives and deliver. We have not been equally well grounded in understanding our relationships with the people in our workplace; nor in change leadership, i.e. listening, motivating, involving, energising and setting the example.

The pervasive task-oriented 'management' culture has taken us to one side of the spectrum. And the 'people stuff' has been looked on as a matter for the HR function to solve – without actually recognising the true role or value of the HR function itself.

Managers need to take back responsibility for the people who work for them, rather than simply managing the tasks those people perform. Then HR can get back to its vital functional role of supporting the development of the organisation, rather than simply 'fixing' the problems managers won't listen to or don't know how to deal with.

One of HR's most important jobs is to ensure the 'new' leadership skills are in place, from the highest levels down; and to work with colleagues across the organisation on establishing the conditions and processes that will facilitate people's ability to exercise those skills. HR and management should also collaborate on adapting the organisation's recruitment criteria, looking beyond technical skills to include the right behavioural competencies as an equal 'must-have'.

In the short term, this may call for a revamp of the HR skill set as well. Many HR people are trained in and focused on tasks themselves, such as payroll or administering benefits packages. These tasks will still need to be done; but HR should be ready to assume its role at the strategic level, not just in implementation.

The sooner, the better

In today's world, as leaders, we cannot afford to delegate or downplay the 'people issues' any longer – for one very good reason: there are so many more of them than in the past, and they are present every day in all environments.

Decades of corporate activity and innovations have yielded: matrix organisations, multicultural team management, communicating change in different contexts, stronger functional interdependencies, and the effects of integrating different cultures from mergers and acquisitions.

These are combined with the ongoing external forces of globalisation, competition, advancing technology and market liberalisation to drive leadership (and HR) into their new roles.

The alternative – continuing to merely manage tasks and information – is likely to have a short-term future.

This is not just about leading change but changing leadership.