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The Chief Enabler

We need our top executives to do less executing, and more enabling. That's leadership.

By John Baldoni

The chief executive looks alternately glum and concerned, as well as resolute and determined.

This is a portrait of life at the top, according to a recent advertising campaign for PriceWaterhouseCoopers. We see the chief in close-up as well as with his employees. The tagline of the spots calls for a "chief courage officer." Courage is critical, sure, but what this commercial also underscores is something that is often overlooked. Leadership in the corporate arena is less about the person at the top and more and more about employees at every level in the organization. In one PWC commercial we see the CEO asking for volunteers, and in another spot we note an employee telling her boss bad news. These TV spots illustrate a leader who wants and seeks out the support of his team. Indeed, in real life we need our executives to be less executive in bearing and more enabling in behavior.

Leading by Sharing

The reputation of CEOs generally has taken a major hit due to recent corporate governance scandals, but there are signs that the spotlight is returning once again for those at the top. Part of that spotlight is scrutiny, but another part is hero worship. This is unfair to both CEO and the rest of the organization. Right now the tenure of a CEO at a multibillion-dollar enterprise seems to rival that of an NFL running back—three years and out. For example, Boeing has had three CEOs in less than two years, and major insurance companies are shuffling their decks in the wake of price-fixing scandals. Turnover at the top is not healthy for the CEO nor for the organization. Not only does it fracture succession plans, it fractures careers of those aspiring to lead. It provokes unwanted change in order to accommodate a new person at the top.

And this gets to the root of the problem. One of the greatest shortcomings of senior managers is the failure to understand that leadership is less about them and more about others. Their role is to enable others to succeed; their success is based upon success of the team. Intellectually, senior managers understand this; you have only to listen to their canned presentations. But their actions belie their words. They insist on participating in the doing rather than the leading. Their job is not to do the work; it is to enable others to do the work. Here are some ways managers can encourage this enabling.

Set expectations. All too often new managers feel that it is their job to run the department as well as run the jobs. Nothing could be further from the truth. Don't blame the manager; blame the boss who promoted him without adequate training. Corporate managers could learn much from newly minted second lieutenants who arrive at their first assignments as platoon leaders. Those who think they will run things are quickly disabused of this notion by the first sergeant. Lieutenants soon learn that it is the sergeant who holds the power in the platoon; it is the lieutenant's job to set direction and let the troops do their jobs. The officer is there to provide guidance and support; the sergeant manages the team.

Ask for input. The higher you rise in the organization the higher the expectations. Some managers, however, either out of fear of looking down or fear of losing their grip, only look up. That is, they seek guidance from their superiors but ignore those around them. If one of them is lucky enough to assume the top slot then that executive has very little support. Better to ask for help along the way. Ask questions. The simple act of asking questions does three things: One, it demonstrates a capacity of inquiry and a desire to know; two, it demonstrates an acknowledgement that you do not have all the answers; and three, it demonstrates that you value someone else's opinion.

Show vulnerability. We expect much of our CEOs—knowledge, strength and courage. We don't expect them to show emotion, unless it's anger. Organizations don't want to see their CEOs sweat, unless, like a Chainsaw Al Dunlap, they are loathed. But if a CEO does reveal a human side, he is manifesting humanity. That should be an endearing quality and not perceived as a weakness. Of course, when women leaders do this, the naysayers pounce, claiming that emotion has no place in management. Too bad. Perhaps if more emotion were shown, companies like Enron with its macho image would have avoided some of its more egregious errors. After all, it took a woman, Sheryl Watkins, to blow the first whistle.

Share the credit. Ultimately if managers want to enable their people, they must enable them to participate in the glory, too. Those at the top who hog all the credit will quickly communicate that they come first. Employees understand this implicitly. And that's why there is far too little enabling going on. Their attitude becomes: Why bother when my actions will only make the big guy look good? Short-sighted perhaps, but very human. Therefore, it's up to managers to make the first move by sharing credit. Not simply with words but also by actions that include public recognition, awards and even promotion.

Leadership at Every Level

Leaders who enable do more than share the load; they make certain that the load is shared. They put the team on notice that they must participate in the leadership process, not simply wait for it to happen. Successful franchise operations are a good example of how this works. McDonald's operators are leaders in the workplace; they recruit, retain and promote their people by delegating responsibility and authority. They also serve as leaders in their community; franchisees are major sponsors of youth sports and community councils. In addition, McDonald's operators provide input into the running of the company in new product development, marketing and operations. Leadership is a given as well as an expectation.

Leaders who enable are those who accomplish their results. Intel provides a good example of this. As a technology-driven company it has developed a culture of participatory leadership. From founder Robert Noyce to successors such as Andrew Grove, Craig Barrett and now Paul Ottelini, Intel has expectations that senior managers will not only execute, but also innovate and provide good feedback for their people up and down the organization. Success at Intel is not reserved for those at the top; it's part of the shared enterprise. Enabling others to succeed is fundamental to leadership and it pays dividends in terms of results that benefit individuals, teams and organizations.

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