

## RESOURCES

## The Right Leadership Epitaph



Senior leaders often ponder their organizational legacies as they approach retirement. Arguably, they should think about this sooner. This article addresses how leaders should be remembered by their organizations. “Legacy” is an interesting concept in a dynamic environment. Perhaps leadership legacies should be critiqued through an analogous prism to that of legacy IT systems. Poor present choices may leave the organization vulnerable and facing expensive improvement choices. Consequently, neither may be sufficiently flexible to undergird survival, much less prosperity. How might this metrically be substantiated? Only a single original Dow 30 company remains in the industrial average calculation, and seven of them (in their present form) were added in the past decade.



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The global economy needs entrepreneurial artisans. Even so, entrepreneurial leaders are not immortal. Like Superman, they are vulnerable to their own form of kryptonite. The number one challenge I encounter with leadership coaching is that past success provides little assurance of future success. The easiest way to make money is put the right people in the right positions, a sentiment argued in Bill Conaty’s and Ram Charan’s book *The Talent Masters—Why Smart Leaders Put People Before Numbers*. This speaks to the essence of “good” legacy. Business conditions are not static. Growth is the only option. However, like low tide, growth exposes navigational hazards. Among the perils are overwhelmed executives in worn organizational configurations.

#### Customer’s Perspective

Three points are made in support of an effective leadership legacy epitaph. First, critique the organization’s design from the customer’s perspective. Customers do not care about titles or departments. Customers prefer simplicity, accountability and results. Essentially, leaders should focus on what the customer is hiring the organization to provide as a resource. This perspective should influence how the company purports to integrate with the customer for seamless workflow. A monument to improper focus is the typical sales pitch to customers, which bloats about our companies—not the customers’ needs. By contrast, Jeff Thull explains in *Mastering the Complex Sale* that customers are listening for partners who provide solutions for known problems, as well anticipated solutions for the unknown problems. The organization should

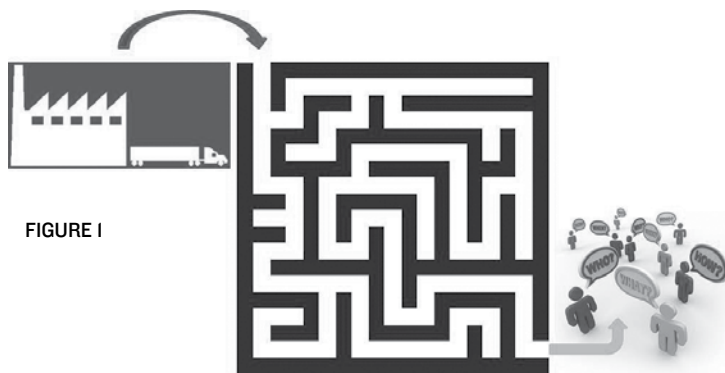


FIGURE 1

be designed to deliver solutions quickly and reliably to the customers’ needs—not subjecting them to a frustrating maze (see Figure 1). Who decides the specifications for “quickly” and “reliably”? The customer! Socrates proffered a sage observation: “Nature has given us two ears, two eyes, and but one tongue—to the end that we should hear and see more than we speak.”

An organizational design corollary begs mention. Numerous researchers, including prolific writer Clayton Christensen, write of the need to isolate disruptive innovation initiatives from the existing structure for its healthy gestation. Unfortunately, disruptive endeavors launched within an existing organizational design are greeted the same as viruses by antibodies. This is a mammoth topic worthy of its own article.

#### Murphy’s Law

The second point for the leadership epitaph is that key positions should have back-up. Murphy’s Law reminds us that anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Consequently, back-up, or replacement planning, is a form of disaster recovery. This compels leaders to think ahead for gaps catalyzed by attrition, indisposition, emergency or special projects. (Figure 2 provides a tool for evaluating an organizational unit’s talent pool.) An adage helps

frame the incumbent manager’s perspective: “If you cannot be replaced, you cannot be promoted.” Among the leader’s roles is determining whether her subordinate manager’s oversight is a developmental need or something more nefarious, i.e., insecurity and control

issues. Perhaps the challenge is a partial—instead of a complete—gap. In other words, back-up candidates might be “ideal” if only they had specifically identified supplemental skills that may be addressed by training and development within the performance management system.

#### Vision

The third leadership epitaph point is that leaders must have a vision for the requisite skills of tomorrow’s leaders. Indeed, the needed skills may not exist today and require outright reinvention of the company. However, compliant with the learning culture promoted by Peter Senge, we should encourage improved skillsets within existing ranks and welcome new ones in our recruitment efforts. Myopia kills organizations. Sometimes it is the out-

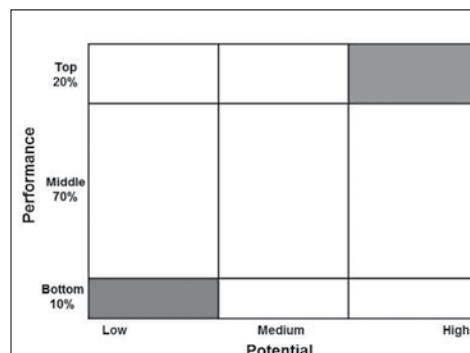


FIGURE 2

sider who has the temerity to point out the obvious, thus enabling the company to avert demise. Even so, once the outsider becomes an insider, the danger of groupthink lurks in the shadows. Leaders may hedge this risk by plugging into luminaries and think tanks for insights. Moreover, high-potential employees should be paired with mentors—preferably outside the firm firewall—to enhance leadership development.

The odds are high that Baby Boomers are ceding leadership to Generation Xers who are recruiting mostly Generation Yers. New hires likely brandish different values and motivations from preceding generations. Just as the Boomer was culturally perplexed by his “traditional” parents and grandparents, the roles are now reversed. The Boomers are now the old guard. Leaders must master trans-generational dynamics that further vary by continent.

Above all, tomorrow’s leaders must not lose the ability to think critically, i.e., asking the right questions. Just as chameleons adjust to their environments, organizations may need to morph to remain customer-focused. Leaders lack the omniscience of foreknowledge. However, leaders may draw upon foresight principles to frame scenarios that enable effective planning against variables germane to all situations, as well as variables unique to fluid situations. (Figure 3 demonstrates a foresighted tool beneficial to future recruitment.)

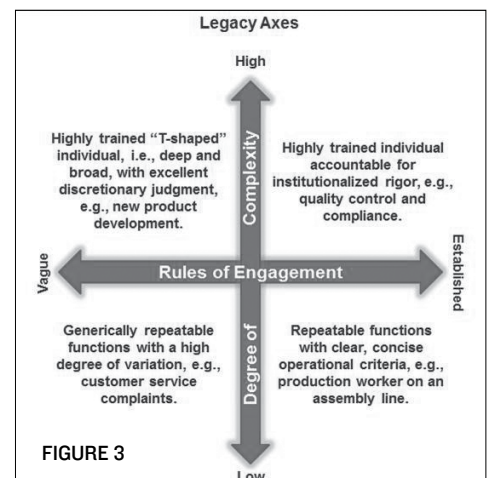


FIGURE 3

In summary, the right leadership epitaph is rooted in organizational behaviors—not propagandized prose. Great leaders prepare their organizations to exploit present opportunities while preparing to capitalize on future opportunities. Several futures are possible. The best thing a leader leaves behind is a team with the skills—or resolve to acquire the needed skills—to figure out whatever the competitive ecosystem requires. Leaders should take pride in developing a team whose performance both eclipses their tenure and prepares their successors to repeat the tradition. Eleanor Roosevelt summed it up nicely: “A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader; a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves.” In lieu of recalling the leader’s tenure as a pejorative epithet, effective legacy principles serve as an endearing epitaph.

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## Getting Teams “Unstuck”

Going into the summer months, I started sensing that my leaders (and their teams) had begun to “get stuck” in advancing some of their most important goals. These periods are a normal part of any journey, which are always filled with ups, downs and plateaus. Becoming aware of plateaus as a result of flat performance measures is a rear-view approach; it is better to anticipate these periods through the emotional clues littered in our daily interactions.



By  
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Behaviors that are inhibiting our teams are all around us. How is their energy? What are they paying attention to? What stories are they telling? Are they taking personal responsibility for what they can control, or are they pointing the finger elsewhere? People’s words

tell us a lot about their state of mind, and one of our goals as leaders must be to keep people’s mindsets as resourceful as possible. For most people stuck in the face of a challenge, they can be easily knocked off-center, shaking their confidence and allowing anxiety to set in. In these moments, they have a critical choice that can impact how they feel, as well as their go-forward resourcefulness.

Unfortunately, most people facing a challenge, or lack of results, hide behind reasons

