



Process-Based Leadership

It is best to pay close attention to the basics

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Let's get real. All of the touchy-feely leadership stuff of the last decade has gotten old. The flavor of the moment has not really served your business, or many others, all that well. There have been so many fads and flavors, who can keep count? Every guru, theorist and management expert has a different solution and each one is touted as better than the rest. Here is what is real: There are basic principles that apply across generations of theories and rhetoric. So, let's talk about returning to the basics, building processes that work and encouraging accountability.

The Basics

Your dealership is a business, not a social club, charity or mental institution. That means that everyone has to carry his or her own weight, and produce and deliver quality on a regular basis. That means that people have to address their personal issues on their own time and devote workday energy to work. This has become something of a novel concept. While I am not unsympathetic to the crises that impact many lives, I recognize the fact that the focus in the dealership has to be on the dealership, its goals and objectives. Shane Yount, principal of North Carolina-based Competitive Solutions, sums it up when he says: "Over the last 10 years leaders have lost focus. Focus and accountability are paramount to business success."

Yount's principles are both refreshing, in their emphasis on basic concepts of organizational excellence, and very clear (Yount is author of "Buried Alive: Digging Out of the Management Dump-



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ster," published by Oakley). He advocates that managers, at all levels, must assume the level of accountability appropriate for their position in the organization. This means that they have to move from

what Yount calls "personality-driven" to "process-driven" leadership. The differences between the two are clear. The former relies on a steady downward progression from dictating to hesitating to

eventually annihilating. The latter relies on two visible, auditable processes: demonstrating and facilitating.

In addition to demonstrating basic competence, leaders must also demonstrate their ability to create and utilize a common business language. This is best done through business scorecards that monitor substantive progress towards goals. This language is further created by facilitating sound communication processes. This means a dialogue, an actual flow of information, throughout the organization. We often make the mistake of thinking that communication is a downward flow of information, from the dealership principal to the troops. In fact, communication must flow vertically and horizontally. The peer-to-peer communication is as essential as upwards communication in the dealership.

Accountability: The Forgotten Art

Accountability, the next basic leadership competence, is crucial. Yount advocates use of what he calls an “action register.” These clever tools place accountability for action with individual employees, not just their managers. They use a date-tracking system to be certain that activities are completed in an acceptable timeframe. They must work pretty well considering the fact that Yount’s clients include heavy hitters like Kellogg’s, Harley Davidson and Sun Oil.

An even more basic system for building accountability is performance management. This is not the annual appraisal that many of us pretend is a performance-management system. Instead, I am referring to a systematic approach to measuring and managing performance throughout the organization. This involves building regular dialogue with employees and their managers about goals, developmental needs and the supporting plans.

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Performance management requires regular dialogue akin to the communication system mentioned earlier. This means that you, the dealer, are responsible for building consistent conversation about performance expectations. Further, you are called upon to deliver praise, support and encouragement when people meet and exceed their goals. This positive feedback is best received with timely delivery. The same applies to the constructive criticism that will surely have to be delivered from time to time. Employees need honest feedback when they are not measuring up. It is unwise to wait until an annual or semi-annual review to deliver feedback, positive or negative. Timeliness is the key, as is honesty. Rather than dance around the issues, you owe it to your people to tell them the truth, whatever it may be.

Processes That Work

There is another component of process-based leadership. It is the examination of the processes themselves. Some processes just do not make sense. Some processes take too long to be effective. Other processes are obsolete. So, it is up to you to reinvent workable processes.

Nadim Matta and Ronald Ashkenas detail what they call “rapid-results initiatives” (adapted from “Why Good Projects Fail Anyway,” by Nadim F. Matta and Ronald N. Ashkenas, Harvard Business Review, September 2003, pp. 109-114). These initiatives are led by cross-functional teams that work for a specified period of time to accomplish a measurable objective. Rapid-results teams give new responsibilities to frontline staff while challenging senior executives to rethink the way that they lead. These teams have a results orientation that changes the way teams and companies address work. People close to the action are held accountable for producing results. These teams are rewarded not for the tasks that they perform, but for the results that they deliver. This is actually more energizing and enticing for teams because rather than plod along forever, they are focused on delivering results within the time frame determined at the outset.

Let’s say that you have projects that require a more long-term focus than rapid-results initiatives provide. Consider breaking those projects into smaller chunks that lend themselves to the rapid-results approach. You will be able to see early results on components of the project. This creates a new habit in the dealership — the habit of delivering results. This type of project orientation requires leaders to rethink their roles. Instead of managing minutia, they are charged with implementing processes that facilitate the attainment of strategic objectives. Yount’s action registers and other tools that record commitments and activities support this creation of an accomplishment-oriented culture. These types of tools redirect leadership energy to the area where it matters the most: goal attainment.

If the action register idea does not work for you, find project-planning tools

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that fit you and your company. There are many software packages that make project management simple. Whichever tools you select, be sure that you use them to their highest potential. Post weekly, monthly and quarterly milestones so that everyone has a visual reminder of where you are headed and how you are getting there. Assign responsibility for action steps so that nothing falls into the black hole. Be sure that teams and workgroups

are communicating with each other so that interdependence becomes the norm.

Summary

We are all weary from the never-ending onslaught of theories and gimmicks that supposedly crystallize leadership. The reality of life is that there are no quick fixes, rather we are better served by paying close attention to the basics. Those basics include building accountability at all

levels, clear processes and dialogue throughout the dealership. This means that all employees know and understand their functions, responsibilities and expected outcomes. This high level of accountability is supported through clear performance management systems. None of the points raised in this article are new or revolutionary. However, their consistent application will raise performance and productivity to new, high levels. ■

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