

Leaders: More Socrates/Less Dr. Phil

The democratic primaries are in full swing right now. Both parties are gearing up for the 2004 election. This means another cycle where segments of the population cry out for an effective leader to provide us answers to our collective ills. In turn, there never seems to be any shortage of politicians coming forward saying “I have the answer”.

This same pattern appears inside companies whenever they stop performing well for a period of time. A period of time these days can be anywhere from 3 years to three quarters, for public companies at least. Once that point is reached, companies go off on their own search for the next great leader. The assumption being, once we find that leader with the right answer, we can all rest easy.

It’s long past time to let go of the notion that there are certain leaders out there who have answers for the rest of us, and we just need to find them. They don’t, and we need to stop looking. Most leaders, *at all levels*, will breath a sigh of relief with this. If you catch them in an honest and vulnerable moment, I think they will admit:

- They don’t have any answers for the rest of us
- Any idea they do have is incomplete
- Today’s answer may be obsolete by tomorrow, and, most importantly,
- It’s scary and extremely stressful to have people looking to you to have “the answers”

Framing Tough Questions vs. Giving Answers

Some leaders inside organizations, like many of our politicians, still want to play the hero role. They are very comfortable taking charge, dictating plans and strategies, being the “go-to guy” with the answers. They need to stop. This is not what we need. What the really effective leaders have learned is that instead of bringing predefined solutions forward, it is more effective to confront people with the tough questions the organization must address and let them loose to find the solutions. We need more Socrates (asking provocative questions) and less Dr. Phil (dispensing “action steps”).

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Here's an example of the preoccupation of leaders who think their job is to provide answers. A year ago, I was facilitating a series of leadership workshops for middle managers in a company. I asked them during the first session what kinds of things they would like to address over the five times we would be getting together. Below is a partial list of some of the issues they brought up:

- How can I make sure we're consistent in meeting our deadlines and standards and be fair about workload distribution?
- How do we balance our quality improvement efforts with our productivity pressures?
- How do I better delegate?
- How can we be more creative in managing our work when resources are shrinking and things are speeding up?
- How can we continue to stay effective and have fun at work?

My first response was,

“Great questions! Why do you think it's all on you to answer them?”

My pushback to these leaders was that all of these questions could be brought to their people instead of discussed in manager meetings or in leadership workshops. I told them to get over their control issues and take the questions to their respective teams, e.g.,...

“Folks, I want to make sure we meet our commitments to deadlines AND at the same time be fair in the distribution of workloads. I need your help. Knowing our headcount restrictions, how do we do both?”

Engaging people this way is so much more effective than telling them what to do. *But doesn't this approach take more time on the front-end?*, you might ask. Generally, yes. *Can't we get to implementation faster if the leader just tells us what to do?* Again, yes. This approach *is* slower on the front-end. It follows the principle of “go slow to go fast.” Deciding for the team and asking them to implement *your* solution follows the principle of “go fast to go slow.” Effective leaders follow the former principle for three fundamental reasons:

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- 1. Learning The Business:** Involving your people in discussing and assessing the trade-offs and the variables in managing the business takes time, but makes for a more resilient and responsive system. As employees work through different solutions and reflect on the impact on the different aspects of the business, they become better business managers. And, once people understand the context for their choices, they can make adjustments “in the moment” without having to consult leadership, which just slows everything down. Some leaders will say that their people don’t want to know that much about the business - - that they just want to be told what to do. That’s bunk! A very small percentage may want that, but most don’t.
- 2. Ownership Around Implementation:** People are less enthusiastic about implementing someone else’s solution no matter how brilliant, benchmarked or best-in-class it is. People also tend to give up more easily when they hit a setback when implementing something they had no say in. When people feel they had influence over a solution, they will sustain their effort.
- 3. Sustainability:** The above two factors help spread accountability throughout the system, making it more flexible and sustainable. It is *not* dependent on specific leaders. If those leaders leave, the rest of the organization can carry on with nary a hitch because they understand the variables they must manage.

Tempering Our Solutions

For leaders and employees alike, they should remember not to get too wedded to any solution. In an ever more connected global world where markets, customers, suppliers, nations, etc. are constantly influencing each other with their actions, *all solutions are temporary*. The principle to remember when devising solutions is pretty simple □ **What works...Here...For now.**

Let’s break that down:

What works: means focus on whatever seems to be working vs. what’s “ideal” or the “right” way. And give up your searches to benchmark for “best practices.” Whatever you find out there is still, at the end of the day, someone else’s solution. Trust your people to come up with their own solution and don’t waste time trying to perfect it before implementing.

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Here: means focus on solutions that make sense for your immediate area/department or site. Stay away from “corporate” devised solutions or benchmarked ones, unless you adjust them for local conditions.

For Now: means we need to let go of and adjust any of today’s solutions as soon as we get data saying it’s no longer effective. Because of the need to stay flexible, avoid attempts to *mandate* new practices and/or turn them into SOP’s or policy. If you must, call it “policy for now” and keep people apprised of customer feedback and market data so they know when a new policy, or even better, a new *guideline*, needs to be made.

Now I know some of you leaders reading this article will very soon be in yet another management meeting with your colleagues. You may find yourselves discussing the latest business challenge facing your organization, e.g.,

“One of our good customers is threatening to go with another supplier if we don’t improve our fill rates and improve service overall. How are we going to do that without producing excess inventory that hurts our cash flow?”

Fight the urge to answer that question there! Take it to your people and let them surprise you.

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