



The Natural Way

DISCUSSIONS AROUND THE WATER COOLER can get a bit heated in our office. (OK, it's not really a cooler, but rather a countertop filtering and refrigerating device.) And those debates generally stay friendly. However, we seem to have a pretty wide gap in our thinking when it comes to this issue's cover topic: The Unnatural Leader.

Everyone seems to have his or her own idea what that means. I don't like to use this space to plug items in the issue, but I urge you to read this very timely article and give it some thought.

For some people, the notion of an unnatural leader is a person who is a bit reluctant, the executive or manager who finds herself in a leadership role and not quite sure what to do about it. That's not what the authors are talking about, but it does happen now and then. Likewise, we've all known managers at the other end of the spectrum, too. Those are the kind of people who have difficulty staying focused because they jump from idea to idea every 10 seconds. They are sometimes referred to as "charismatic" or "unconventional," which are just polite ways of saying they're batty. If you haven't worked for one of those people, count yourself lucky.

The unnatural leader must wage war against conventional wisdom and have the courage to do things the way they seldom teach you in business school.

It was my great joy (and a bit of pain) to work for a savvy publisher some years ago who could have only been described as unconventional. He had a number of young managers in whom he placed great responsibility—which we'd definitely not earned. He allowed us to develop programs and plans that were not in the playbook of our staid competition, and we built a highly profitable company for him.

But while working with us to create a new kind of company, he was also busy in the shadows keeping it running like a classic blue chip organization. Budgets were scrutinized. Expenses were monitored. Personnel were maximized. Waste was trimmed.

It's one thing to have the courage to let your people find new paths to glory. But no matter how daring you are in your management approach, numbers must still be crunched and the bottom line must be served. Leaders who forget that lesson soon have no one to lead.

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