

**Leadership development should be a never-ending learning process.**

# AVOIDING THE LEADERSHIP TAILSPIN

By Antony Bell

When I first took flying lessons, one of the skills I was required to master was how to avoid stalling the engine in a steep climb or at the apex of the climb, and what to do when it happened. That lesson is relevant for today's business leaders: How do you avoid stalling at the top?

With executive leadership turnover at all-time highs, the need for answers has never been more acute.

## **Complex challenges**

Company leaders face some powerful and complex challenges.

The expectations for business performance have never been as high or on such a widespread scale. The level of scrutiny has never been as intense—whether from the government, shareholders, customers, employees, or the community—and the scope of business has never been as broad, and the pace of innovation has never been as rapid.

The sheer size of organizations complicates the task of leading them. In the mid 1980s, 18 companies employed more than 100,000 people. By the end of the 1990s, that number ballooned

to more than 50. For all organizations, whatever their size, choices are multiple and complex, and with every acquisition and every joint venture, another layer of complexity is added.

## **Leadership tendencies**

Despite these challenges, leaders must examine what they are doing and how they are doing it.

Leaders tend to operate from intuition and experience. While both can serve a leader well, neither is infallible. Intuition cannot compensate for a leader's blind spots, and experience is a tutor with a limited perspective.

Leaders tend to become leaders because they are technically competent, but the technical competence that made them effective at one level often makes them less effective at the next.

Few leaders are taught to lead, at least formally. Academic institutions tend to focus more on the organization of work than on the application of leadership, and MBAs study only a narrow portion of leadership. Many corporations offer in-house programs, but few combine strong teaching with in-depth coaching. Systematic feedback is rare—only a fortunate few have the informal input of a particularly effective boss or mentor.

So leaders stall partly because of the difficult global climate, but they stall even more because they haven't acquired the skills they need to overcome leadership challenges. There's nothing you can do about the global climate, but there's plenty you can do about the skills we need for the top.

### On the way to the top

Before I ever went up in a plane on my own, I was given plenty of instruction. So when I hit the top and the engine stalled, I knew what to do. How quickly you can pull out of the tailspin will depend on how quickly you learn the principles best learned on the way up.

Some leaders stall because of issues of integrity, honesty, dependability, and consistency.

Leadership is also an issue of competence. That competence is a function of how well leaders grasp the three dimensions of leadership—organizational leadership, operational leadership, and people leadership—and how they apply to their particular leadership role. Stalling at the top is often the result of misunderstanding how these three dimensions interact and what skills are associated with each one.

Organizational leadership has to do with the effectiveness and relevance of the organization. Leaders must give their organization a clear sense of direction, make sure its resources are aligned to that direction, and ensure that everyone agrees with that direction. If you are not exercising those skills, you're going to stall.

Operational leadership, which has to do with the efficiency of its internal operations, forces leaders to have a clear understanding of process planning and systems thinking, organize and control

the systems, measure performance, and solve problems. Many leaders do this well, but the difficulty arises when they have trouble admitting when more organizational leadership is required. Failing to do so is a recipe for stalling.

People leadership has to do with the productivity of the individuals within the organization. When people leadership is exercised successfully, leaders are bringing out the best in their employees. Without a commitment to bring out the best in your people, you are more likely to stall.

### Action items

When you start to feel yourself losing control of direction or focus, there are a few things you can do to right the ship:

**Create and clarify your purpose.** This can be hard work, but it's necessary. A purpose statement (not to be confused with a mission statement) should define the organization's reason for being—capture the soul of the organization. It's much larger than the scope of the organization; it's a decision-making tool.

**Envision the future you want to shape.** Strong visions lead to bold initiatives, and bold initiatives are expressed in bold goals that capture the heart, mind, and energy of the organization.

**Motivate your staff so they will support you.** People are free to choose their leaders, so leaders must work to keep their staff. As a leader of people, you can master motivation by recognizing the different levels of need your people may be facing, lining up consequences to sup-

port behaviors you want, distinguishing true and false motivators, adjusting your approach to the different behavioral styles of your people and providing credible leadership that people can trust.

**Defect from the cult of charisma.** Strong, clearly articulated values are far more powerful than charisma in effective leadership. You don't have to be charismatic to be a great leader; you simply need to have a clear set of values, articulate them often, and live by them.

### The right habits

Avoiding the stall at the top—or coping with it when it happens—is much easier if you develop the right habits.

- Never stop learning. Leaders are constantly reading, asking questions, and stretching their thinking.
- Be a disciplined learner. Leaders put their thoughts down on paper so they don't forget them.
- Welcome feedback. Have an open-door policy where staff can freely express their opinions and concerns. Ask questions and listen to the answers.

None of this guarantees that you'll avoid stalling. But these tips and habits will keep you from falling.

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