



The Artform of Leadership

Without any question, “leadership” is the most studied and least understood topic of any I can think of. To start with, there are more than 350 definitions with more coined by the dozens each month. Leadership training contains as many variants as there are definitions, which is appropriate since the state of that art can most appropriately be called formless.

In order to get closer to understand the artform of leadership, it helps to address the following question: *How do organizations translate intention into reality and sustain it?* Leadership is the major component, though it must be held within a context of organizational factors.

The question of “translating-intention-into-reality” contains complexity and depth, as well as chronic elusiveness. This undoubtedly explains why it tends to be avoided, though it is the essence of what is ordinarily meant to be organizational leadership. Even when it is indirectly touched on, the orchestral richness inherent in the question is bypassed in favor of the doctrinal, predictable and prosaic cliches. Between the blur produced by saying too much at once and the banality which

comes from dismissing mysteries, there remains the possibility of articulating just what it is that causes some organizations to translate an intention into reality and sustain it.

The leader

Important clues about the nature of effective leadership have come out of a study I recently completed of 90 CEOs. These studies provide a basis for generalizing about those “chiefs” who successfully achieved mastery over the noisy, incessant

action. In short, they were concerned not with “doing things right” (the overriding concern of managers) but with “doing the right thing.” They were capable of transforming doubts into the psychological grounds of common purpose.

I found that all the CEOs, in varying degrees, possessed the following competencies:

- *Vision*: the capacity to create and communicate a compelling vision of a desired state of affairs, a vision (or paradigm, context, frame) that induces the

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environments (which I covered in my previous column), rather than throwing up their hands and living in a perpetual state of “present shock.”

What all these effective CEOs shared and embodied was directly related to how they construed their roles. To use a popular distinction, they viewed themselves as leaders, not managers; they were concerned with their organization’s basic purposes, why it exists and its general direction. They did not spend time on the “how to,” but with purpose and paradigms of

commitment and clarity to the vision;

- *Communication and alignment*: the capacity to communicate a vision in order to gain the support of multiple constituencies;

- *Persistence, consistency, focus*: the capacity to maintain the organization’s direction, especially when the going gets rough;

- *Empowerment*: the capacity to create environments—the appropriate social architecture—that can tap and harness the energies and abilities necessary

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to bring about the desired results.

In short, nothing serves an organization better—especially during these times of agonizing doubts and paralyzing ambiguities—than leadership that knows what it wants, communicates those intentions accurately, empowers others and knows how to stay on course and when to change.

The compelling vision

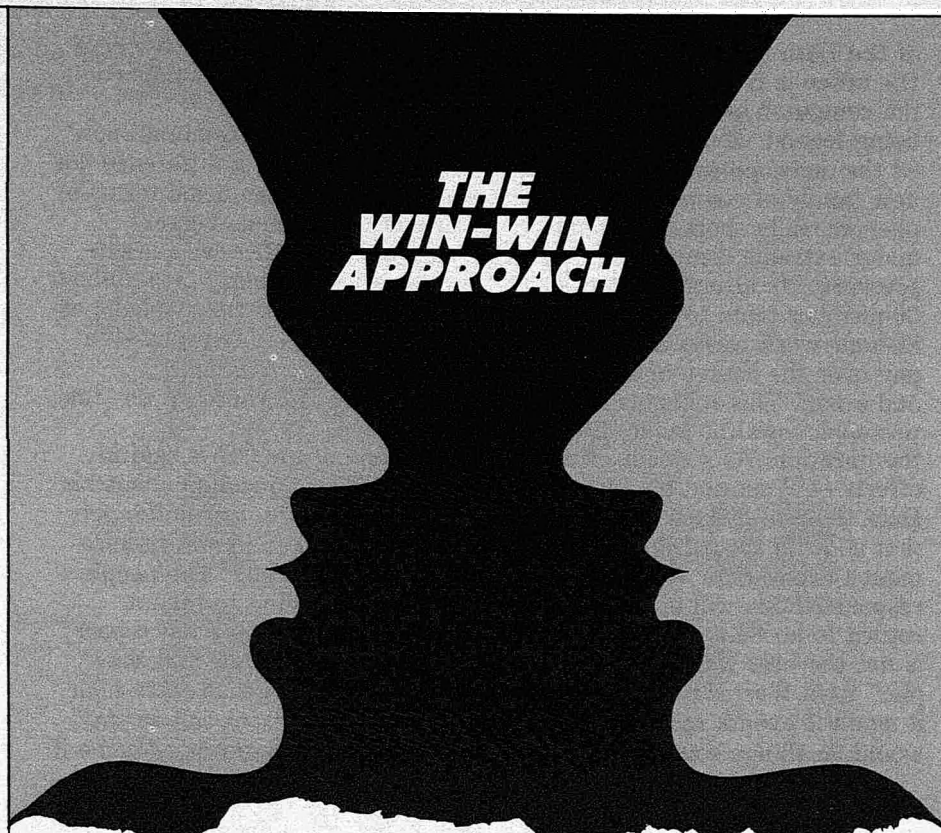
It's important to keep in mind that before an intention can be translated into reality, it must be expressed convincingly enough to attract participants. It must be a *compelling vision*. The vision has to be expressed in such a way to have the capacity to take an organization to a place it's never been before. That's what the art-form of leadership is all about.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of the vision and its makeup. For without it, we become a dreamless society, one that, at best, is guided by a drifting pragmatism. A compelling vision is a set of symbolic forms expressing a tapestry of intentions.

The intention and its expression—crowns and coronations, limousines and conferences—give what goes on in organizations an aura of being not merely important but, in some odd fashion, connected with the way the world is built. The gravity of organizational leadership and solemnity of high worship spring from more similar sources than might first appear.

"... Being near the heart of things"

Leadership is truly effective when individuals (employees) place symbolic value on intentions and their expression. It is the relationship of the governed to the *active centers* of the social order that makes the difference between leadership and everyday management. Such centers have nothing to do with geometry and little with geography. Such centers have nothing to do, either, with those touchstones of



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management, those catch phrases such as "humanizing the work place," or those security blanket phrases such as "theory X, theory Y," "quality of work life" or "participative management."

It's important for the organization and its members to concentrate on *serious acts*. These con-

sist of areas in society where its leading ideas and institutions vitally affect members' lives. It is not popular appeal or inventive craziness I have in mind, but being near the *heart of things*.

J. Thomas West, for example, works in a windowless subterranean office at the headquarters

of the Data General Corporation. His office is the work place of the computer industry's latest living legend: West masterminded the development of a complex new family of computers in a phenomenally short time while under extreme competitive pressure. He also motivated a 30-member team to put in 80-hour work weeks at no extra pay over the course of a year and a half. This relinquished any personal, social or family life for the duration. As a result of the efforts of West and his team, Data General is back in competition with its rival, Digital Equipment Corporation. West's new responsibilities will entail a return to an 80-hour week. "This is not the best way to work people," says West, "but I would do it again if events required it. I would do things somewhat dif-

ferently, like say hello to people . . . I had no idea how important a hello could be."

West and Data General knew they could make a difference not convertible to the usual forms of incentives, such as bigger quarters, an office with a window, a higher salary or a 20-hour work week. It is the symbolic expression of the intentions—the crowns and coronations, limousines and conferences—that counts.

As one of my CEOs said in response to a question about his leadership style, it was the people who worked in an organization that counted: "The people who were willing to take a chance because they felt a part of something magic, and they wanted to work that extra hour or make that extra call or stay on that extra Saturday. Maybe if

we had a different management group that did exactly the same thing, except to instill that extra willingness, we would not have made it."

It is not, after all, standing outside the social order in some excited state of self-regard that makes a leader numinous. It is not a "System 4" or a "9-9" grid score that makes a leader effective. It is not having to say "hello." It is a deep, intimate involvement near or at the heart of things which motivates and empowers. That's the magic that HRD has to understand if practitioners are to succeed in leadership training and development.

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