

Changing What Leaders Do, Not What They Are

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne (INSEAD) say that according to Gallup's 2013 *State of the American Workplace* report, only 30 percent of employees are actively committed to doing a good job, 50 percent are putting in time, and the remaining 20 percent are discontented and acting out in counterproductive ways. The reason? Ineffective leadership, say Kim and Mauborgne. "We never cease to be amazed by the talent and energy we see in the organizations we study. Sadly, we are equally amazed by how much of it is squandered by poor leadership."

"Of course, managers don't intend to be poor leaders," they continue. "The problem is that they lack a clear understanding of just what changes it would take to bring out the best in everyone and achieve high impact... [L]eadership, in essence, can be thought of as a service that people in an organization 'buy' or 'don't buy'... When people value your leadership practices, they in effect buy your leadership. But when employees don't buy your leadership, they disengage, becoming noncustomers of your leadership."

So how do we improve leaders? Not by trying to change their values, qualities, and behavioral styles, say Kim and Mauborgne. That's been the traditional approach, and it's painfully slow and often ineffective. "It's markedly easier to change people's acts and activities than their values, qualities, and behavioral traits," they say. "[A]ctivities are something that any individual can change, given the right feedback and guidance."

And the best way to get feedback is to ask subordinates what leadership practices will enable them to do their jobs effectively and empower them to be part of the process. "Extending leadership capabilities deep into the front line unleashes the latent talent and drive of a critical mass of employees," say Kim and Mauborgne, "and creating strong distributed leadership significantly enhances performance across the organization." Here are the four steps they recommend:

- *Do a reality check.* Teams of respected employees interview frontline personnel, middle managers, and top executives about which acts and activities – good and bad – leaders at all levels are spending time on, and what they're *not* doing that might be helpful. "The results are almost always eye-opening," say Kim and Mauborgne. "It's not uncommon to find that 20% to 40% of the acts and activities of leaders at all three levels provide only questionable value to those above and below them. It's also not uncommon to find that leaders are underinvesting in 20% to 40% of the acts and activities that interviewees at their level cite as important." In one company, the interviews revealed that top managers weren't doing the things most important to the future – thinking, probing, identifying opportunities on the horizon, and gearing up the organization to capitalize on them.

- *Develop alternative leadership profiles.* The interview teams go back for another round of questions, this time asking about unproductive things leaders should do *less* of (or stop doing) and potentially productive things leaders should do more of.

- *Identify desired leadership profiles.* Kim and Mauborgne recommend a "leadership fair" involving the whole organization in which the interview data are presented in graphic form. There's an open discussion of the findings and people come up with a bumper-sticker-length tagline for each level. In one organization, the tagline for frontline leaders was *Cut through the crap*, for middle managers it

was *Liberate, coach, and empower*, and for top executives it was *Delegate and chart the company's future*. “The frontline leaders were energized and ready to charge ahead,” say Kim and Mauborgne. “Senior managers went from feeling towed under the waves by all the middle-management duties they had to coordinate and attend to, to feeling as if they could finally get their heads above water and see the beauty of the ocean they had to chart.” Middle managers found this process the most difficult, because they were reluctant to let go and empower the people below them.

• *Institutionalize the new leadership practices*. The decisions of the leadership team are disseminated throughout the organization, and everyone is held accountable in monthly meetings for the proposed changes. Initiatives like this often meet with skepticism, say Kim and Mauborgne. They suggest the following steps to ensure successful implementation:

- Make sure the process is led by respected senior managers.
- Get everyone involved in defining what leaders should do.
- Give people at all levels a say in the final decisions.
- Make it easy to assess whether expectations are being met.

What this process develops is *trust*, the authors conclude, “and hence, voluntary cooperation, a quality vital to the leader-follower relationship. Anyone who has ever worked in an organization understands how important trust is. If you trust the process and the people you work for, you’re willing to go the extra mile and give your best. If you don’t trust them, you’ll stick to the letter of the law that binds your contract with the organization and devote your energy to protecting your position and fighting over turf rather than to winning customers and creating value. Not only will your abilities be wasted, but they will often work against your organization’s performance.”

“Blue Ocean Leadership” by Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne in *Harvard Business Review*, May 2014 (Vol. 92, #5, p. 60-72)