



When The Enterprise Is On Hold

No one likes to be put on “hold,” especially when energized and ready to act. Yet that is just what executives do if they become the bottleneck that inhibits action in their enterprise. They choke off potential and stymie performance. Delay, lost momentum, missed opportunities, and aggravation are the result. Bottlenecks do not cap or preserve the energy inside an enterprise. They sap it!

“Bottleneck leaders” always stand out. They are the ones blocking progress when items needing their evaluation and approval go unresolved. Or they may preside over a calendar so jammed that even a short, spontaneous meeting is out of the question. An open slot on their schedule is days away.

What causes leaders to put their enterprise on hold—to be the bottleneck? Indecision, poor delegation practices, and an inability to manage “frequent followers” top the list.

Indecision

Leaders who suffer from chronic indecision are hazardous to the health of any enterprise. Their handicap is a recurring inability to select and pursue an appropriate course of action. Moreover, by putting an enterprise on hold, indecisive leaders constrain managers and employees awaiting the necessary go-ahead. Lacking that, they are prohibited from moving forward, even at critical moments. As delays grow, so does frustration and perhaps doubt or confusion about a leader’s capabilities. In addition to elapsed time, the costs of unwanted delay also may accrue as greater operating expenses and missed opportunities, especially in rapidly changing environments.

Symptoms of indecision are usually easy to spot. A wait-and-see posture often signifies that a leader is indecisive, as do recurring meetings during which previously addressed issues are rehashed. Requiring additional consultations and special studies, or repeated policy and document revisions often signal indecision too.

What causes leaders to be indecisive? Two contributors are common. The first is an absence of clear goals. When enterprise goals are poorly defined, or when known goals are in conflict, it is difficult for anyone to determine which actions are best. Indecision and confusion result. Good leaders take responsi-

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bility for resolving such issues and achieving goal clarity. Leaders who become bottlenecks often do not.

Low self confidence also explains indecision. Excessive or unmanaged fear of mistakes and failure or unwillingness to take even smart risks can severely handicap an executive. Lacking confidence, they also refrain from exploring new opportunities that could be attractive to the enterprise.

The capabilities and levels of confidence that leaders require for success will never grow out of indecisiveness or an inability to take action. By contrast, good leaders not only recognize when they face such limitations, they find ways to overcome them. They gain confidence from having a sense of control over potential outcomes and from experience and practice—even the making of mistakes.

Inability to Delegate

“Always too much to do and *always* too little time!” is another sure sign of leaders who impede enterprise performance. Their real problem may be trying to do too much themselves. This is a common challenge for new leaders, but some veteran executives also are dogged by this handicap. Inevitably, it catches up with both as they gain greater responsibility. Leaders either learn to delegate or they too become bottlenecks behind which a backlog of work accumulates. Chronic inability to delegate responsibility and assign work wisely hinders their performance and is likely to limit career advancement.

No one can delegate effectively unless they are certain of the responsibilities they hold and define the standards of performance for fulfilling those responsibilities. Then, they must determine which tasks only they can perform. All others are candidates for delegation.

Why don’t otherwise good leaders delegate? Four reasons stand out.

Some leaders are simply over-confident—even arrogant—believing that no one can do the job as well. Even on the occasions where this judgment could be valid, they may ultimately falter, perhaps because they are unable to complete the work on time, or because team members, sensing arrogance, withhold trust or support.

Second, because of insecurity, stemming from their low self-confidence, they may choose to do the



high profile work themselves to demonstrate that they are capable. Insecurity disguises itself in many ways. For example, an insecure leader may say she chooses not to delegate because of her desire to remain directly involved in the work of the team. Another may claim that by delegating responsibility for some tasks, he would be ceding control, something he does not wish to do. In reality, proper delegation neither removes a leader from the team's activities nor leads to a loss of control. When well done, it augments their capability, enabling them to work through others, and boosts their team's accomplishments as well.

Third, they simply may doubt their team's abilities, judging that individually or collectively its members do not have the acumen or skills to carry out important assignments. However, because leaders are expected to develop the capabilities of their team members, recurring doubt itself may be a symptom of poor leadership and a failure to build a team's potential.

Fourth, one may even claim that shirking responsibilities associated with their leadership role is unacceptable, or that they will not push their work onto others. However, when managed properly, delegation is neither. Although leaders cannot transfer accountability for enterprise performance, they are expected to delegate responsibilities for tasks they need not perform themselves. It comes down to this: Good leaders ensure they are always working on the right thing—those tasks that are essential to the enterprise and which cannot be performed by anyone else. In turn, they assign to their team members responsibilities that they are best able to fulfill.

Inability to Manage the Frequent Follower

Frequent followers also cause executive bottlenecks. Frequent followers are those managers and employees who bring issue after issue, significant or not, to a leader in order to gain their go-ahead, endorsement, or advice. Whenever leaders allow this to happen—a situation often evident by the line of people waiting at the door or on the calendar—they too put the enterprise on hold.

Why do some otherwise good associates, managers, and employees tend to make a path to the leader's door when decisions must be made?

First, they may be uncertain of enterprise priorities, policies, or preferences. Poor communication may be the explanation. Of course, it should never be assumed that a single statement, e-mail, or memo gets the word out to everyone. Therefore, over-communication can be a useful practice. Simple messages delivered by multiple media are helpful in aligning staff actions with enterprise requirements. People tend to

receive some forms of communication better than others. Multi-channel communication improves the likelihood that a leader's message will be received.

Second, frequent followers may be reluctant to initiate action on their own. Perhaps they fear committing errors or making mistakes. Or they may be unaware that they have the authority to act. Either can cause them to repeatedly seek guidance or approval before taking any action.

Third, they may be unaware of feasible or alternative actions. If recurring unfamiliarity with options is their reason for repeated meetings, it tells leaders that they cannot simply answer their question and have them go away. Rather, they must find alternatives for increasing the employee's knowledge and skills.

Fourth, followers may place personal interests before those of the enterprise. They may simply want direct interaction with a particular executive or leader in the belief that "face time" signals


their importance to peers. Or, they may believe that frequent interaction adds to their visibility with an executive, an advantage they hope will be helpful in the development of their careers. Sometimes repeated one-on-one meetings are sought to lobby on behalf of views they hold concerning an issue of importance to them and the enterprise.

All of these situations are even more troublesome when employees circumvent their direct manager or supervisor to interact with an executive.

How should a leader deal with the frequent follower? A starting point is to track the number of visits and interruptions during a day or week, revealing the amount of time a certain person is consuming. When used in conversation with that individual, the information can be shared as a means of determining the underlying cause of their activities. Depending on the exact need, the discussion can be directed toward guidance on decisions that could have been made by the manager or staff member. Or, insights gained might lead to mentoring, coaching or training to develop skills that will enable them to, when appropriate, initiate actions by themselves and without a meeting

Executive Leadership Today

Leaders set the pace for their enterprise. When an enterprise is not moving at the speed of the world around it, look for the point of constriction and the place where progress has slowed. Top leaders in well-run enterprises follow a simply stated principle:

Don't ever put your team on hold! 

— Jim Senn

Director, Center for Global Business Leadership

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