

THE MACRIS GROUP

UPDATE NEWSLETTER VOLUME NO. XV– MAY 2016

www.themacrisgroup.com

From Dean's Desk:



Prologue

Distractions abound around us. All one must do is watch the evening news to witness how calculated distractions camouflage real issues. We have found that distractions are more disruptive than most of us realize. In addition to their disruptive nature, taking action to eliminate or minimize distractions becomes a significant leadership challenge. Before developing corrective strategies an understanding of distractions must be characterized. In this article we attempt to characterize distractions by dissecting them. Our final article in this series is the tough one, where we will offer thoughts on how to stem distractions so leaders can improve their effectiveness.

Leadership Distractions Dissected

Larry Reiter

A. C. Macris

Introduction

The first article of this year advanced the premise that distractions confronting leaders may be one of the biggest challenges to their leadership effectiveness. In that issue of UPDATE, we began formulating our thoughts regarding distractions, and things started lining up. A major factor on leadership effectiveness is reactivity within the organization. If the organization, department, etc. is operating in a reactive mode, then the distractions become the normal mode of business. This cycle is difficult to break, yet we are confident our readers have experienced this condition. Considering the distractions within a reactive organization, the energy needed by a leader just to “put out fires” on a daily basis impacts his or her proactive intentions and abilities. We also discussed what we refer to as ‘self-imposed/self-created’ distractions where leaders create several of the distractions that befall them. Those self-imposed/self-created distractions include:

- ◆ Micro-management
- ◆ Lack of trust of their people or their superiors
- ◆ Lack of ability to delegate
- ◆ Lack of focus
- ◆ Poor decision-making

- ◆ Well-intentioned to a fault
- ◆ Unmanaged conflict – running issues/conflicts up the flag pole or ignoring them and hoping they will go away
- ◆ Weak hierarchy that creates distractions rather than helping

This issue attempts to dissect each of the above self-imposed distractions, recognizing that these are driven by the reactivity we refer to above. Getting out of the cycle of reactivity is difficult and requires a plan, a commitment and self-discipline. Our intention in this article is to drill into each of the distractions to better understand them, and highlight the relationship between distractions and the cycle of reactivity. In the third article we will explore ways of managing distractions resulting in improved leadership performance.

Micro-management

We have all experienced working for a micro-manager. What a joy, if you are a supervisor or lower level manager. Every little decision requires input or approval from the boss. You wonder if you have any competence or even why you are in the position. In most instances this is not

THE MACRIS GROUP

a reflection of you and your capabilities but of the confidence and skills of the boss. Unfortunately, managers cannot let go of the details. They may have had the same experience while moving up the organization chart and feel that is the expected norm. The reason for this behavior may also be insecurity. The boss is not sure of his/her ability to be in this position or they may look for that which makes them comfortable – i.e. getting involved in details. This keeps them occupied and they can then ignore the uncomfortable issues such as long-range planning and growing the future of the organization. Too many are moved into senior positions based on their performance in lower level positions and are not provided the training and given clear expectations of what the new role requires. So, they focus on what they are most comfortable with and the behaviors they feel got them to this higher position.

The negative impact of this behavior was experienced by one of your authors. Working in a large technical organization micro-management became the norm for senior managers. They were all technical people who loved detail. This behavior became almost inbred in the organization to the point where it was named “Stump the Dummy.” When a senior manager was meeting with his direct reports, he would keep asking more and more detailed questions until the direct report did not have the answer on the tip of his/her tongue. Therefore, the senior manager stumped the dummy. For these meetings, bringing to the meeting the engineers who were doing the detailed work was not acceptable. The manager was expected to know every detail. This behavior then forced the lower-level manager to know every detail to avoid failing in Stump the Dummy. Not only did this “game” discourage people, but it also prevented bright people in the organization from getting exposure to upper management.

Is the answer to this trait more training on how to behave as a senior manager or is it having an enlightened senior manager who does not micro-manage. The answer is probably both. The organization should have expectations for its senior managers and should be clear about the need to understand the work going on in their organization and also focusing on much broader

issues. New senior managers often need mentoring on the broader aspects of the position, but too often asking for such help is seen or perceived as a weakness and therefore avoided. Mentoring and selected training should be a standard to help a person acclimate to a new position and to develop the new skills required at the higher position.

Lack of trust of their people or their superiors

This distractive trait is often related to micro-management. There are people who have egos that they just have to display. These are people who are convinced that no one can do things better than them. There are also cases where a subordinate makes a mistake and that mistake stays in the mind forever. If a subordinate makes a mistake, use it as a teaching moment and help the person learn. Don't hold it over the subordinate's head forever. If the subordinate doesn't improve then there are other actions that may

be needed, such as additional training or perhaps reassignment or even termination. These latter two are only last resort actions after attempts to work with the individual or providing training.

Lack of trust of superiors is dangerous. This can be a perception of the individual or it can be based in fact. If it is based in fact, the individual needs to do some serious evaluation of whether he/she wants to remain in that organization. Trying to work around an untrusted superior will for the most part, end poorly and could derail the career of the individual.

If this lack of trust of the superiors is a perception without a true basis the individual needs to assess his/her perception. It would be best to discuss with someone, but that can be tricky. If the discussion is with someone else in the organization it can get back to the superior and derail the career. It would be best to discuss with someone who is impartial. Use an outside consultant or do some networking and find someone from outside the company who you trust to be a sounding board and help you discuss your concerns. Either that perception is reality and you need to reassess your current employer or the perception is unfounded and you need to develop a personal plan to get past that perception and build a good working relationship with your boss.



Lack of ability to delegate

When a person is successful at a working level position they are because of the work they do. There may be some collaborative projects but a majority of the success is due to the individual talents. When moved into a supervisory and a subsequent management position expectations change. No longer are you expected to do the work but to develop and use those who now work for you. While you have those same technical skills, doing the detailed work is no longer your job.

Some people quickly adjust to a supervisory or managerial role, others need coaching and training and a third group struggle to give up the detailed work and do not delegate and develop their staff. This third group disrupts and distracts and often discourages their team of subordinates. A line exists between correcting and coaching, and just redoing the work as you would. By stepping in and doing the task, does not help the subordinate learn and will eventually demotivate them. It takes self-discipline for the supervisor/manager to resist doing the detail work instead of coaching and mentoring. Leaders have to provide guidance, allow the subordinate to ask questions and try it again and again, if necessary. The supervisor/manager who cannot give up detail work will soon fail in their leadership role or they will limit future growth.

Learning to delegate is not easy. Sure you can just give out assignments, but are you giving the right assignments to the right people? Are you using assignments to expand and develop your subordinates? Are you available to help coach the subordinates without doing the work for them? We could list other questions but the point is that delegation is a skill that must be developed to be effective.

Lack of Focus

Who doesn't have a plethora of distractions in their lives? There are work distractions like the "oh by the way" assignments given by your boss or the distractions brought to you by your peers. There are personal life distractions – the disagreement you and your spouse had last night, the stress of getting to your child's soccer game or worse, getting there on time to coach the team. The leak in the kitchen that is getting bigger and needs attention. The list could go on and on. Sometimes it seems that your actual job is the least important thing in your life.

We realize compartmentalizing each of these distractions is difficult, but it needs to be done. There may be times you just need to take a day off work to deal with some of the outside issues. Maybe you need to find someone to help you coach the soccer team and give up some of that pressure. Maybe you need to politely decline the appointment to new team at work or to the city planning commission. Prioritize your life and decide what is most important to being able to focus on your role as a supervisor/manager. You have a responsibility to your organization, to help those who report to you become successful, and you have a responsibility to your family. When you are in your work role you need to be present and focused on those who depend on you. When you are in your family role, focus on them. Sounds easy but we know it is not.

Poor decision-making

The topic of decision-making is one of the most written about leadership skills ever. We do not intend to reiterate decision-making in that context. The point here is to present the disruptive effect of poor decision-making from viewpoint of the leader as an individual. In our leadership classes we stress the importance of self-awareness, introspection and effects of stress on leadership behavior. We believe that poor decisions are a result of other distractions, or other stressors a leader may be experiencing. The consequence of decisions made under stress themselves become disruptions.

We administer different behavioral assessments in our practice. The outcomes of these assessments provide individuals with insights into their behavioral type under normal situations and increasing levels of stress. In one particular assessment the premise is that excessive stress shifts behavior, and the shift is predictable based on the normal behavior. While for the most part the outcomes of these assessments are fascinating to those who partake, the learning and insights gained can be powerful information to help control behavior when one knows the pattern when stress becomes an overriding influence.

Case in point, there was a CEO who fell victim to several of these disruptive influences, and as a result, he found himself either stressed or his normal charming self. The real problem was not knowing which person he was. Through an assessment we learned that when stressed his behavior was equally predictable. The challenge was to get him to realize this and the damage he was creating by jumping to decisions while in the stressed state. Perhaps

THE MACRIS GROUP

the biggest problem with all this is the follow-up behavior. The scenario might go as follows: An event or condition was brought up at a meeting. Resolution to the CEO was clear in his mind but flawed in his logic. When that was pointed out (in private so as not to embarrass him) he was so stressed that he made a poor decision to launch an outrage that was inappropriate and damaging. Damaging not only to the person who was the recipient, but those who could overhear the outrage within earshot of his office. Only later to apologize to the individual for his outrageous behavior. This sequence of outrage followed by apologies became a trademark. By not knowing the well-researched predictability of his behavioral patterns, he made poor decisions. In reality, he became a victim of his own inability to recognize the stress and temper his poor decision-making.

One can only image the disruptive nature of the overall encounter; to the CEO who was disrupted, the recipient and those who overheard the outrage. Take this to the next level, what happens when stressors and the inability to recognize that they are affecting behavior come into play for business, operational or administrative behaviors. If similar aberrant behavior influences those decisions, the subsequent consequences of those poor decisions has to be dealt with and rectified.

Well-intentioned to a fault

Being well-intentioned is an admirable trait for a leader. Compassion for subordinates and employees is not only desirable but important to the culture of the organization. We believe that most leaders want to give their people the benefit of the doubt. Be considerate of each person's situation and attempt to balance those situations with the best interest of the company as well as the individual. Anything less than that is not only harsh, but ineffective and detrimental to both the organization and the leader's effectiveness. The issue here is, when being well-intentioned goes to the extreme. When affording the benefit of the doubt becomes risky to the leader and the organization. Risky can mean different things depending on the situation. What we have experienced is when a leader's good intentions are taken advantage of to the point where those involved actually subvert the leadership for their own benefit. One situation that stands out is the case of a senior executive who demonstrated some subversive behaviors along with another senior person who had subversive

ambitions and needed the other executive to secure his objectives. This subversive behavior while subtle was recognized by other executives and discussed. As the consultant, I informed the CEO of these observations. The second executive who was the collaborative partner was close to retirement. The CEO felt he was of minimal influence and wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt and allow him to serve out his time (hopefully in a rather benign fashion) so he would receive his retirement. We continued to warn the CEO, but his compassion and desire to give the second executive an opportunity to complete his career, did not confront the subversion the CEO knew about. The outcome was the CEO's leadership was subverted, those two senior executives were successful in having the CEO disenfranchised by the parent company and the two of them survived and took over the leadership of the company. The original CEO was well-intentioned to a fault.

Personnel conflicts are a normal course of organizational functioning, but when they occur between key individuals, such conflicts can become a major distraction to a leader. It can be as simple as two key people who just don't get along. Both have been good employees. One is close to retirement, the other is not. A short-term strategy assumes the conflict will go away once the older person retires. What the leader believes is his good intention is, in effect, passive-aggressive. It does nothing to eliminate the conflict; rather, neglecting the situation and the ongoing lack of cooperation becomes a distraction to the leader and other employees.

Unmanaged conflict - running issues/conflicts up the flag pole or ignoring them, hoping they will go away. This distraction is a good example of a reactive organization, but also ties into the other distractions we are discussing. It's also manifested in flat organizations where the decision-making/problem resolution hierarchy is weak. None-the-less, whenever the smallest of issues arise, and they are escalated to higher levels of management/leadership, these situations are disruptions and interruptions that impact a leader's effectiveness. The other side of unmanaged conflict is leaders like to think of themselves as problem solvers, and these situations are typical what we teach as "Convergent" problems. Ones that can be dealt with since the solutions converge upon themselves in a rather clear manner. Therefore, these issues or conflicts are addressed but can be significant disruptions depending on how the respective parties lob-

by their cause.

In this specific disruptive case, another insidious consequence exists which is indirect, and impacts both the organization and the leadership. It's the overall disruption caused by the conflict, beyond just those involved. We refer to these as 'sideline effects.' Those sitting on the sidelines or who are impacted indirectly by the conflict are distracted from their normal work as they watch the drama unfold. Then after resolution people congregate and spend time 'talking it down.' For the leader, this indirect impact fosters the wrong behavior. Local problem solving is not being cultivated in the organization. If the leader falls victim to those who approach him with minor problems, and allows them to run their problem up the flagpole to the leader, then she is falling short on several leadership learning opportunities. The goal should not be the disposition of problems; it should be resolution at the lowest level in the organization.

Finally, the case exists where instead of taking the bait and resolving the problem for those who approach a leader, leaders take the approach that maybe it will go away if I let emotions cool off; the 'do nothing option.' This tends to exacerbate the initial issue and escalates the problem to some future time when it can be worse. Or worse yet, the do nothing option becomes a reflection on the leader's ability to not deal with problems, making the leader even less effective. We have witnessed this particular type of distraction and it is disruptive. When this distraction is repeated on a rather routine basis the distraction becomes damaging to the organization and leadership.

Weak hierarchy that creates distractions rather than helping

From an organizational effectiveness perspective, workforce planning and strategic staffing are important activities. We have worked in several organizations attempting to align the right people into the right jobs. When issues of favoritism or time in service (TIS) become the promotion criteria the hierarchy can, and in most cases under these issues, will be ineffective, unqualified, unprepared and deficient. For leaders to be as effective they need a support team that is the best they can field. A weak hierarchy creates an immense amount of dis-

traction because those below the leader cannot function as necessary, thereby shifting their leadership responsibilities to their immediate leader.

The age old mistake of taking a good technical or operational person and reward them with a promotion to a management/leadership position assuming they will function at a level equal to their technical or operational expertise is false. For senior leaders to be effective they need to build their team over time. Select the right people, mentor and groom them, train them and afford them time to work in the areas they are being prepared to lead. When that happens the senior leader can be just that and focus on his job knowing that his support team is capable and proficient at theirs.

Getting out of the cycle of reactivity is difficult and requires a plan, a commitment and self-discipline.

Closing

As stated above, the eight distractions we are discussing are not exclusive, with distinct relationships between them. What we are attempting here is to dissect the issues that distract leaders, to better understand the components that affect leadership effectiveness. We know that distractions are a part of life, but they can consume and overwhelm or they can be accepted and dealt with. With this understanding we can offer thoughts and perspectives on how to overcome these disruptive aspects, which challenge leaders. Our concluding article in this series will provide these perspectives and further highlight the integrated nature of these disruptions. Our overall intention is to increase awareness of the things that may be considered as normal daily irritations to a leader, and offer some ways to minimize the disruptions such that they can focus on their leadership responsibilities.

The Macris Group

PO Box 535, Mystic, CT 06355
860.572.0043

www.themacrisgroup.com, acmpc@acmacris.com