From Dean's Desk:

Prologue

Our goal is to help today's leaders and to develop leaders for tomorrow. To that end we must constantly monitor the research and studies on the topic of leadership. Development Dimensions International, (DDI) conducts their Global Leadership Forecast, which we have quoted in previous issues of UPDATE. A 2012 forecast coming out soon, previews of that study indicate the following as excerpted from Newswire PR TODAY.

Quality of leadership and leadership development:

From the Forecast, only 38% of leaders themselves, and 36% in the UK, rate their organisation's leadership quality as high. Their HR peers rate leadership even more poorly with only 25% of HR professionals stating that their organisational leadership quality is high.

Effective leadership directly contributes to organisational effectiveness and the bottom line:

According to DDI, leadership capability should be a major concern for organisations if they want to become more effective in today's global marketplace and there is evidence to support this.

66% of leaders within organisations who rate their overall leadership quality as high are confident of business success. At the other end of the scale, only 4% of leaders in organisations with low rated leadership quality are confident of success.

Skills required for today's business environment:

With the business world changing so fast the survey sought to understand whether the skillset leaders have are the same as those they expect to need in the next few years. Some of the key skills leaders expect remain important, such as driving and managing change; coaching and developing others and executing organisational strategy.

Lethargic Leadership

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Introduction
We write much about the state of leadership, definitions of good leadership, and examples of lacking leadership. Many times, though, the leadership is really not lacking but is lethargic. In these cases, leaders know what needs to be done, but for a multitude of reasons they don't do it. As leaders they become lethargic with moments of brilliance. We are looking at the leadership void somewhat differently. It may be the case that the void is not universally the same and manifests itself in various ways. In effect, the void is contextual. In order to gain more insight into this dilemma, we define Lethargic Leadership as "the manifestation of procrastinated decision-making to the extent that over time it becomes a cultural norm."

In other words, lethargic leaders defer decision making. The outcomes, or lack of results, realized by deferred decision making, are recognized by the organization. Most employees have some insight into the workings of the organization, and

they see when "the right thing" is not being done. So let's look into Lethargic Leadership, but before that, we would like to establish some fundamental beliefs we have about leadership.

- Leaders are paid to make tough decisions
- Leadership is hard work
- Leaders are not privileged; they have serious obligations to serve
- Leadership is not a popularity contest
- Leadership requires humility and level headed thinking
- Leadership is not a paint by the numbers proposition

Let's look briefly at each of these in the context of establishing a baseline for this article.

Leaders are paid to make tough decisions

When someone achieves a leadership position, it comes with the responsibility of making decisions that others cannot or do not have the authority to make. Tough decisions may

not be popular, most of the time they are not pleasant, and they require conviction. Tough decisions should be thought through carefully so they will not have to be retracted or reversed. The first time a tough decision is reversed by the person making it, those impacted by the decision start to questions the leader's ability. Reverse multiple decisions and its game over: credibility is lost and all future decisions are in jeopardy. With the leadership paycheck comes the responsibility and requirement to make those tough calls.

Leadership is hard work
Being a leader is not what most people might think it is. The thing people typically see is executives on golf courses, in sky boxes at sporting events, at evening galas, etc. That goes with the territory, but hard work is the fundamental requirement. Strategic perspectives of the company, monitoring and managing resources, accountability to stake and stockholders, and integrity, are key areas of responsibility and accountability. To do all these things and more requires hard work – don't be intoxicated by the perception of good times and glamorous life styles.

Leaders are not privileged
This goes along with leadership being difficult work. While it may appear that they are privileged, leaders have higher callings. They have an obligation to serve. When leaders believe they are privileged, they lose touch with their organization. Leaders must maintain contact with their people in order to better serve their organization.

Leadership is not a popularity contest
Charisma is an important component of a leadership, and leaders like to know they are 'revered,' but leadership is not a popularity contest. Leaders are often confronted with challenges that require unpopular decisions. If leaders chase popularity, they are sure to fail because there will always be a constituency that will not agree with their decisions. A leader must make decisions that they may personally not like, but are in the best interest of the organization as a whole.

Leadership requires humility and level headed thinking
In our workshops we focus on self-awareness and emotional intelligence. We also include a Myers Briggs component of Type Dynamics which focuses on those "triggers" that take us away from level-headed thinking. The issue here is to maintain composure at all costs. With self-awareness and understanding of Type Dynamics, leaders are armed with the knowledge of what it takes to maintain that composure. Humility is not a characteristic commonly associated with effective and/or strong leadership. But in recent times we read more about Servant Leadership (see our UPDATE Volume VIII, Issue 2 October 2010).   We sincerely believe in these concepts, but please note that humility is not to be con-

fused with vacillating or weak leadership. In reality, it is the just the opposite. Humility and empathy are actually characteristics of strong leaders.

Leadership is not a paint by the numbers proposition
We believe leadership is a cognitive function based on competencies, attributes, and experience applied in the appropriate context. In a paint by the numbers composition, all you have to do is fill in the space with the appropriate color and – voilà – you have a painting… sort of. Think about all those leadership books that prescribe a series of steps as the path to effective leadership. Following those steps will lead to leadership that looks like a paint by the numbers picture. Leaders must be able to integrate information and use their skills, knowledge, and their personal attributes in the best combination for the situation. This is so much more than following a series of how to steps. Each leader has to develop his/her own leadership skills and style. Learn from successful leaders, but don't try to be them. Paint your own picture by learning from others and from your mistakes, not by blindly following another successful leader.

With the above, we hopefully have established a baseline of our fundamental leadership beliefs. Now we want to introduce and discuss the notion of Lethargic Leadership. As stated above, we define Lethargic Leadership as "the manifestation of procrastinated decision-making to the extent that over time it becomes a cultural norm." How is lethargic leadership manifested? We see it in our leaders via the following behaviors:

  Leaders taking the path of least resistance
  Leaders assuming the 'do nothing option' (avoidance)
  Leaders giving the benefit of the doubt beyond any normal context
  Leaders with the best of intentions
  Leaders who are "in over their heads"
  Leaders who are self-absorbed
  Leaders who are in denial

Leaders taking the path of least resistance
The path of least resistance is a normal human tendency. Stability is a desirable state, and disrupting it can be disconcerting. So rather than doing what is needed to be done, the path of least resistance maintains the status quo. And if the status quo is not all that bad, then why bother? Some leaders think that keeping an even keel is more important than doing the right thing or addressing the things that need to be dealt with. The problem with this is that the inevitable will happen. The issue that is being ignored eventually manifests itself in one way or another, usually at the worst possible time or situation.   Keeping your head down and being a good "yes person" will quickly undermine your leadership.

Another trait of those taking the path of least resistance is just going along with what a prior leader did. Not changing things and not being your own person might work for a short time, but in the long run it will lead to lethargic leadership.

Leaders assuming the 'do nothing option' (avoidance)
Similarly, when a leader is confronted with ways of addressing a situation, there is always the option of avoidance. The do nothing option can be very viable in the eyes of a lethargic leader. One of the rationalizations is that the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know, so why bother doing anything. The problem here is that avoiding the issue and hoping that it will take care of itself is not a plan Just as with taking the path of least resistance, the issue will typically not go away, but will manifest itself at the most inopportune time. Leaders who bury their heads in the sand are not leaders and are not serving their organizations. There will be times when the best decision is no decision but those are rare and that no decision is made only after careful analysis of the situation.

Leaders giving the benefit of the doubt beyond any normal context
We believe in the best in people and often give others the benefit of the doubt. For the most part people are inherently well intentioned. If something in their career does not go well, we feel that it is best to use the situation as a learning opportunity, not a punitive one. This becomes an issue when a leader rationalizes behavior or the situation such that decisions are deferred. In the personnel context, we refer to it as "the bad day syndrome." They are just having a bad day. But when the bad days become the norm, those who work around that person are impacted negatively.

In many of the self-awareness classes we conduct, we often urge leaders to not make rash decisions, to think through the issues, and to weigh the consequences. We still believe that to be the best course of action. Too often decisions are made based on "the moment" and later we find that if we had waited, it may have had a better outcome.

On the other hand, when giving people the benefit of the doubt goes to the extreme, when bad days become the norm and leaders make the decision to not address the issue, the leader's lack of action sends messages to the rest of the organization, and those messages are not one of positive, consistent and effective leadership.

Leaders with the best of intentions
This is more of an overarching effect. We believe leaders want to be balanced and sincerely have the best of intentions for their people and their organization. This is a noble attribute and we applaud those who manage their ability to be well intentioned. Leaders want to do the right thing and to be fair and honest with their people.

As you might expect there is a big 'but' to that. When being well intentioned becomes an excuse for deferring decisions, a leader becomes lethargic and less effective. To illustrate this effect, consider this logic. There is a senior person in an organization who is close to retirement, and while they are good at what they do, they become subversive to the legitimate leadership or an obstacle to the advancement of the organization, despite their experience and knowledge. We have all experienced people at all levels who have "retired in place". With that as the basis, leaders tend to 'allow' these people to hold their present position by rationalizing that they only have a few more years and they will retire. How much harm can they do in a few years? Or leaders feel that some people can be remediated and therefore function effectively, thereby being well intentioned.

Reality is that deferring these decisions is readily seen by the organization. In the context of motivating younger and more motivated employees, retaining people who become obstacles has a significant impact on a leader's credibility. So what is the answer? The role of a senior leader is to keep their people motivated and excited. One way of being well intentioned where it does not lead to organizational lethargy might be to redefine roles and responsibilities. Allow the younger, more motivated employees to assume the day-to-day operational responsibilities while assigning those close to retirement into advisory or mentoring roles where they can impart their expertise and knowledge in an effective way. This approach accomplishes several things: it transfers knowledge, it keeps the organization dynamic, and it eliminates voids when senior people do leave the organization.

Leaders who are "in over their heads"
We have all seen cases where the old "Peter Principle" is in place. That is someone who is in a position they can not handle. They might have been a good supervisor but that does not always translate to being a good manager, etc. A person in a leadership position who can not handle that role can be the most ineffective, lethargic leader. The staff quickly recognizes this and either covers for the "leader" or just adopts a similar do nothing attitude. A real life example we observed was in the nuclear power industry. In the time of dramatic growth of commercial nuclear power, it was common to bring in former officers from the nuclear navy. Some of these officers were

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extremely effective in the commercial field, but some were not. One case we witnessed was a former submarine captain who was put in a senior operations position. The transition from navy to commercial was a major problem and the result was a relatively good functioning organization taking major strides in the wrong direction. The new leader had skills but could not make effective decisions in this new role. He was in over his head.

Leaders who are self-absorbed
Some leaders are so focused on themselves that they can not make decisions that are in the best interest of the organization. Many of these feel that they are entitled to their position either from time-in-service or years "kissing up" to those above them. They may or may not have the skills to be effective leaders, but are so self-focused that they make decisions based on what is best personally, not what is best organizationally. Those who work for these people quickly tune them out and do what they need to do to survive and wait until a new leader comes into the organization.

Leaders who are in denial
This effect is where leaders see and believe what they want to see and believe. In effect they become clueless to the real issues around them. Denial manifests itself in many ways. An example is a vice president who was so captivated by looking at numbers that he would study his computer screen for hours, thinking he was monitoring the progress of several projects. He was looking only at what he wanted to see. In the meantime, while he was mesmerized by his computer, he failed to see that the information presented on the screen had no basis in reality. Once again, there was a delayed effect to the extent that when reality did rear its head, it was way too late and significant project deficits existed.

It is important for leaders to be able to determine whether bumps in the road are just normal upsets that will go away if addressed or whether they indicate significant concerns. Leaders in denial may feel that these are normal issues and will pass, thereby deferring any involvement. They believe things will get better, and that they will be able to pull themselves out of it, as the situation degrades.

In our many years of experience we have never seen a situation where it was effective to deny that a problem exists and assume that it will correct itself.

Summary
The outcome of any and all of the above is one of lethargic leadership. What does that mean – the opposite of dynamic leadership? The above behaviors rarely work independently – many are combined which further complicates or exacerbates the outcome. We attempted to dissect the causes of

lethargic leadership to bring to light observable behaviors. Our supposition is that most of our readers have observed some or most of these behaviors in their professional careers. Our goal is to increase leadership awareness of these behaviors such that they can be recognized and changed. We will also discuss ways of making changes, thereby honing in on this Leadership Void we have written about previously. To better understand our perspective on this issue, we feel it best to continue with a discussion of the consequences of lethargic leadership on individual workers/employees and the organization as a whole.

Associated with the above discussions are consequences of these leadership shortcomings. We have provided some thoughts on the consequences above, and within this section we again will attempt to categorize the consequences in order to illustrate the significantly negative impact of the above shortcomings. We will discuss five consequences:
- Individual performance
- Subversion
- Effectiveness
- Perceptions as a leader
- Overall lowering of the bar

Individual performance
Across several industries and companies our work experience has shown us that when people start a job, they begin motivated and energized. Rarely do people start a job expecting to be a marginal performer. Some are motivated more than others and that will always be the case.

For the purposes of this paper we take the position that people will begin energized and motivated. We also recognize that there are a myriad of things that affect an individual's performance, so we don't intend this to be understood as a simplistic discussion. Therefore in the context of Lethargic leadership our point here is that while most people do start out with high expectations, those expectations become marginalized and performance is then marginalized.

How does this related to lethargic leadership? Let's discuss a real world example. A highly critical call center is staffed by several professionals. One in particular was not carrying the expected call volume which in-turn placed additional demands on the remaining personnel. First, the supervisor did not address the issue, perhaps for many of the reasons discussed above. When the issue became rather intolerable, one of the people brought the situation to the attention of the supervisor, who for whatever reason did little to change the situation. Once again it was brought to the attention of the supervisor who once again did little to correct it.

As a result, the employees who were doing their jobs came to

believe that the supervisor was ineffective and relatively useless. Therefore they became demotivated and their performance marginalized. This is hardly the culture needed for a highly critical call center whose charge is to handle emergency situations.

Subversion

We have written about Subversive Leadership in both the malevolent and benevolent contexts in the early 2000s. The premise of these articles is when the legitimate leadership fails or is inadequate for whatever reason; those below the leader may subvert their leadership in either a benevolent or malevolent manner. We define the two types as follows: Benevolent subversive leadership is when an organization's legitimate leadership is ineffective, incompetent, corrupt or just too busy, and those who are responsible for getting the work done change their approach. If the organization's management is lucky, the employees recognize the leadership's ineffectiveness, but become motivated to do something about it, generally running the organization through the informal networks that exist in every workplace.

Malevolent subversive leadership is when people in the organization attempt to subvert the legitimate leadership in an effort to disrupt legitimate business outcomes, and possibly to depose the legitimate leaders and fill those positions themselves. These people believe the incumbent leadership should be displaced and that they can do a better job themselves.

Lethargic leaders set themselves up to be subverted. People will make it work one way or another. If they believe in their leader, the best scenario is benevolent subversion. If they want to unseat their leader, they will take the malevolent path. In any event, subversion is a consequence of lethargy, and leaders need to understand that.

Effectiveness

A leader's effectiveness is diminished when they are thought to be lethargic. People see lethargic leadership and realize that whatever the issue or the leader's reaction, "this too will pass" and life will go on in a marginal way. Direction given will be ignored or trivialized by the employees.

Perceptions as a leader

Once the image of a leader is tarnished because they demonstrate lethargic behaviors, that leader is no longer perceived as the leader. They may hold the position, but for the most part they will not be perceived as the real leader. The leader will be viewed as an obstacle or someone to be tolerated. Individual performance will suffer as well as the group's performance. Subsequently, this opens opportunities for other more ambitious people to fill the void which in turn typically becomes malevolent subversion. If those more senior tolerate the lethargic leader, then the high performers, if they see no path forward, will seek other job opportunities which results in the loss of precisely the kind of people the organization needs.

Overall lowering of the bar

The most recent issue of The Atlantic Monthly magazine contains an article titled "General Failure" where the article discusses the leadership failures at the highest levels in the military during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The term mediocrity is mentioned several times, and the concept of lethargic leadership is implied when describing how the tactical forces compensated for the leadership failures. We will provide a PDF file of that article if you wish to read it. The point here is that the overall impact of lethargic leadership is mediocre organizational performance. Organizational energy is reduced, and in the longer term, the organizational culture becomes lethargic and sick.

Conclusion

As we have stated several times, leadership is tough work. It is not an entitlement, and not deserving of those who have a long "time-in-service" with the organization. It is not a reward for loyal service. Leadership requires Skills, Attributes, Experience and Introspection. These all have to work together in the appropriate context for a leader to be vibrant and effective. Tough decisions need to be made despite the desire to skirt or ignore the issue. Or even worse, hope that the problem will go away, or people will get used to it.

There is no room for lethargy in leadership. The intention of this article was to bring this phenomenon to the forefront, to attempt to explain the behaviors that lead to lethargic leadership as well as the consequences associated with lethargic leadership. Maybe this will provide some insights into the overall degrading trends in leadership as evidenced in so many studies today.

We always welcome your comments and insight. Our goal is to identify topics, present our thoughts and hopefully motivate our readers to observe and do some introspection to improve their own or their organization's performance.