

THE MACRIS GROUP

UPDATE NEWSLETTER VOLUME NO. XV— JULY 2016

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From Dean's Desk:



Prologue

Welcome to our final article in this series about leadership distractions. We began this series discussing several common leadership challenges that, while resulting from distractions, diminish leadership effectiveness. Distractions cause reactivity, and reactivity is not only difficult to manage, but more difficult to stop and reverse. This article presents components that leaders can implement both to stop and reverse the impact of distractions. As always, we welcome your comments and thoughts.

What Can You Do About Those Distractions

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Introduction

When we first introduced the idea of distractions, we framed them in the context of leadership surveys showing a declining or status quo condition of organizational leadership. We also discussed what we refer to as 'self-imposed/self-created' distractions where leaders create several of the distractions befalling 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
- Good intentions (to a fault!)
- Unmanaged conflict - running issues/conflicts up the flag pole or ignoring them and hoping they will go away
- Weak hierarchy

Our second article in the series dissected each of the self-imposed distractions, where we drilled into each of the distractions to better understand them, and to highlight the relationship between distractions and the cycle of reactivity. In this article, our focus is to provide ways to exit the cycle of reactivity and to manage distractions in

your work and personal life. The eight components discussed below are challenging. They require effort and commitment, from a leader who truly wants to eliminate the distractions. It won't be easy, but it will be worth the effort for your career and your peace of mind.

Forces or obstacles within the organization pose challenges, too. Will the organizational culture support self-assessments? Will the HR policies readily support building the right team? Will peers participate openly in an Inner Circle? While these are real organizational challenges, they can be overcome with effort.

We identify eight components necessary to break the cycle of reactivity and manage distractions:

1. Perform self-assessment, introspection and self-discipline
2. Have an Inner Circle
3. Build the right team
4. Take a careful and objective look at your organization
5. Make a plan with metrics and milestones
6. Communicate - communicate
7. Get people involved - create ownership
8. Celebrate successes

These components are not arbitrarily listed, but in a specif-

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ic order, emphasizing the priority of #1 and the finality of #8. Numbers 2 through 7 are listed in a sequence we feel is best to implement our suggestions. If this order doesn't work for you, please adapt to your situation.

#1 Self-assessment, introspection and self-discipline

This is number one for good reason. Before any leader can begin his or her journey toward effectiveness, it's essential to know oneself, internalize the knowledge gained, and then manage one's ability to control the negatives and exploit the positives. The point is first to gain an objective perspective of oneself.

Without this objective insight, people become victims of their own constructed reality. The intention is to learn more about oneself as a person, as others see you, your strengths and weaknesses, plus your predicted behavior when stressors impact you. We believe most of our readers are familiar with the most common instruments. Taking the step to participate in an assessment is important first and foremost, followed by taking time to learn as much as possible from the report. Most of our clients find this an interesting and fascinating experience—people enjoy learning about themselves. Interestingly enough, these instruments provide a validation of things most people already know. The beauty is the independence of the process: non-judgmental and objective.

Once the assessment has been completed and reviewed, the introspection part begins. Sometimes the feedback is not what was anticipated, and may take some time to accept and internalize. Most instruments include areas for improvement. This is where it gets difficult; while a leader may know about his personality/behavioral weaknesses, understanding how those weaknesses impact his daily life is more difficult to understand. Similarly, regarding strengths, knowing when to leverage strengths as a leader in the proper context takes finesse. Introspection is an ongoing vigil. Furthermore, one of the most important leadership characteristics is self-discipline. The ongoing vigil involves harnessing the requisite self-discipline and the leader's internalization of knowledge from the assessment toward true improvement. Too often the assessment process ends with a cursory understanding of whatever report is provided, followed by a return to business as usual. An Action Plan based on



improvements needed is an important tool in keeping the vigil. Along with the changes a leader realizes he should make, we urge and insist on his creating his own metrics and timeline.

In conjunction with the Action Plan we also suggest a journal, to record both the good and the not so good events of the day, as well provide an opportunity to reflect and determine those things the leader did as expected and how old behaviors crept into the situation. Journaling is valuable both in the near term and the long term. As a leader,

make a commitment to use the journal and a commitment periodically to review your entries. The review reveals where you were, how you have progressed, and if any course corrections are needed. It is a daily, informal reminder and reinforcement of the Action Plan.

#2 Have an Inner Circle

Leadership is a lonely endeavor. One of the biggest leadership challenges is getting candid, objective, qualified inputs and feedback in a non-threatening environment, to help in sorting out issues, ideas, problems, and strategies. We know this because we have been there and have helped those who are there now. An Inner Circle becomes even more important for senior executives and CEOs—often the loneliest members of the organization. Decisions impact employees, clients, customers, families, stockholders, and stakeholders. Leadership at any level is a difficult role, constantly requiring assessment/feedback, adjustment in style, methods, and measures. Objective input prevents narcissism, builds and retains effectiveness and authenticity as a leader, and ensures ongoing support of those being led.

An Inner Circle is a group of experienced and knowledgeable people whom you trust. Some of the characteristics of this group include:

- Common Sense
- Experience
- Honesty
- Knowledge
- Proven Track Record

For mid-level managers, an Inner Circle might include a mentor, sponsor and senior person who knows the organization in its entirety. More senior managers' Inner Circles are a bit more challenging. In lieu of mentors, they may

draw on colleagues from other organizations who are in similar positions with similar challenges, as well as friends and/or colleagues from outside the work environment. The challenge here is the ability to ask the right questions and vet the answers, because advice can be a dangerous thing if not qualified. Finally, for the CEO, her Inner Circle must be external to the organization. While most CEOs have Boards of Directors, the issues a CEO would bring to her Inner Circle she, in most cases, would not bring to her board.

In summary, an Inner Circle becomes the go-to resource for objective, honest and candid insights in a safe and confidential environment. Examples of what a leader can expect from a solid Inner Circle include:

- Providing thoughts, assessments, and insights on issues you wish not to share with others in your organization, your Board or with close colleagues.
- Being a sounding board or providing detailed contributions and tangible actionable plans.
- Possessing unique capabilities or experience, including individualized coaching, mentoring and/or assistance.

Effective leaders surround themselves with key individuals who can act as their support mechanism across the various facets of their leadership responsibilities. An active Inner Circle is the mechanism.

#3 Build the Right Team

The next logical progression to managing distractions is to build your team, those who will be the standard bearers of your leadership. Building a team is not a new concept, but for some reason it seems to be a stumbling block. We have talked about protecting ‘loyal’ employees because they are close to retirement—one of several reasons to keep a team that may not be best suited for the task at hand. A weak team can create major distractions for a leader. Some of the fundamental issues include getting the right people in the right jobs—more fundamentally, knowing what the right jobs are. For new hires,

matching culture is keenly important; before then, leaders should work to ensure the hiring process can predict the success of the new hire. Hiring and firing people is expensive. Once the right people are in place, the building process begins. Teams just don’t happen, they have to be developed and built. There will be stumbling blocks, which is normal and to be expected. What is not normal is to expect a team can develop itself. A team built from “the ground up” is an easier process, but transitioning an existing team into the right team takes work. Existing team

members have to be assessed. Some will require training and mentoring to become the team members you need. Some may just not fit. For these situations, work with the HR department to seek places where existing team members who don’t fit can be moved. Easier said than done, but persevere to get the team you need for success.

The advantages of a good team are tremendous. They do the blocking and tackling. They divert distractions, they make their boss successful

so their boss can do what he or she should be doing – leading the business. This component, along with outsourcing advice from an Inner Circle, can be difficult for micro-managers. As much as they may say they agree and support this concept, when it comes to details and control they tend to take over. We reemphasize the importance of self discipline.

#4 Careful and objective look at your organization

As much as we stress it, objectivity is often overlooked. Companies become organisms with a life of their own; in some cases, they’re quite different than what the original founders had envisioned. The shift can happen so slowly it becomes barely recognizable through changes in personnel and evolving culture. While this “culture creep” may sound ominous, it doesn’t have to be. The issue here is to be aware of your people, the culture and changes over time. We have seen organizations, for any number of reasons, end up being ineffective, stagnant and non-motivational. People who came to work excited to produce and be part of something exciting have become benign and do just as they are told. This is closely tied to the strength of the team.



King Arthur had his Round Table—
leaders need an Inner Circle

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Here's what to look at carefully and objectively, in a flow:

- the organization
- your people
- what they do
- your customer
- whether the customer is happy or just there.

Yes, numbers and spreadsheets speak to sales, profits, etc. but it's the people who make it all happen; losing contact with those who are the organization is a huge mistake.

For an organization to prosper, there must be a periodic review of the evolution of policies, procedures and programs. They tend to grow and expand, becoming a burden to efficiency, creativity and organizational health. When we ask our clients if any policies, procedures and/or programs ever go away, the answer is typically no. It is amazing how over time a good, effective policy or program expands until it becomes so cumbersome or convoluted, people search for ways to circumvent it or get so bogged down by the policy that nothing gets done.

Bob Lutz, the former Vice Chairman of General Motors, wrote a book titled: *Car Guys vs Bean Counters, the Battle for the Soul of American Business*. One of the major points he makes is how engineering requirements of years past were affecting current design. We excerpt from his book:

"In the 1920s and 30s, for instance, there was a problem with tires blowing out against rocks in the wilds of Alaska. Solution: create a test at the GM Proving Ground so severe that this could never happen again. It's called the 'curb test,' whereby the car is driven over a four-inch steel edged curb at normal speed. The tires and wheels must survive the brutal impact. Good! But to achieve that performance, tires must be fat and pillowy and the steel or aluminum wheels small: exactly the opposite of today's style trend to large wheels with tires of much-reduced height. So, no eighteen-inch (or, heaven forbid, nineteen inch) rims for us. I asked about competitors who routinely sold cool-looking when and tire combinations in the U.S. market and was told, "Oh, they all fail the test! In fact, [German competitors with a great reputation] actually suffers front suspension failure." So, we had ugly wheels because of a problem we experienced seventy years ago."

It is not difficult to periodically take a process, pull together people who are part of the process, and flow chart the process. Doing this type of review will invariably show all of the "dumb" and redundant steps that have become part of the process. By eliminating redundancies and steps that are no longer necessary, a streamlined process emerges.

On the people side, periodic reviews of what one's employees are doing is also necessary. Particularly in large organizations, people get into a routine of why and how they do what they do. It's prudent periodically to ask people why they do what they do, what's the driver behind what they do, how much time they spend doing what they do, what they produce and for whom. Then ask the recipient if what he is getting is what he needs and if he uses it. When we did this the outcomes were startling. We found excessive amounts of time were spent on activities and producing documents recipients rarely looked at. When we asked the recipients what they really needed, we were able to capture an amazing amount of wasted staff-hours.

Periodic drilling down into an organization by its leaders is essential and can yield significant benefits. The proactive leadership inherent in this review can minimize or eliminate low value distractions.

#5 Make a plan with metrics and milestones

Distractions take you off the current path. Returning to whatever path you were on can be difficult depending on the distraction. When we talk about a lack of focus, imagine distraction upon distraction and how the path of chasing distractions becomes the norm, at the expense of those activities leaders should be attending to. This behavior is the essence of reactivity and is notoriously difficult to reverse. For these reasons we suggest a plan. Plans mean different things to different people; there are Strategic Plans, Operational Plans, Implementation Plans, etc. This plan is an overarching one, which defines the focus such that the leader can respond to the daily disruptions but then get back to the plan. We also suggest setting metrics and milestones associated with the plan. Metrics and milestones help with keeping the focus and providing tangible indication of progress. If distractions become the norm, the metrics and milestones will reveal their impact, and aid in making adjustments to return to the plan. Progress in the chosen direction is important and being able to keep perspective and control is leadership's role.

#6 Communicate – communicate

We include this because it is important, not because it is a profound concept. Almost anyone who has been in any form of leadership workshop has heard about the importance of communicating with her people. Included is an old organizational development mantra of managing by walking around. Leaders must be in touch with their employees. It is important to know what they are doing as much as it is for them to see their leaders and have them be available and approachable. Sharing information is critical to engaging a workforce. Several studies recently indicate a high level of ‘disengagement’ on the part of employees. With disengagement comes complacency and complacency can become insidious within an organization, manifested by lack of motivation, performance and involvement. Keep in mind some of the best ideas are resident in the people who work for you. Keep them informed and engaged, it become contagious throughout the organization. One of the goals we suggest is to create a culture where problems are solved at the lowest level within the organization. Imagine how distractions could be minimized if they are run up the flagpole to upper management?

#7 Getting people involved – create ownership

The concept of getting people involved is so simple, yet doing so seems to take a huge leap of faith. Giving up control is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strong leadership and trust. One of the last things we want employees to feel is their job is just a job. They show up, put in their time and leave it all behind as they walk out the door. When employees feel as though they are part of the process, their contributions are valued, and they feel they are vested, behavior changes. Advertisements that promote ‘Employee owned’ and ‘Family owned’ are sending the message that “We care.” Our employees are valued and they value the company’s customers. Quality is important because it says who we are. Let’s think about this in the context of distractions, and the above items. We talked in #4 above about doing a flow chart of a process. This flow involves people who are part of the process and gives them a sense of ownership in process revisions. It may even get them doing reviews of their own processes. Getting people involved and vested builds teams; everyone is looking out for the best inter-

ests of the organization because it reflects back to them and for them. Problems are resolved before they become bigger problems; conflicts are minimized or resolved locally, reducing involvement from HR or managers; finally, a sense of esprit-de-corps builds, work no longer is drudgery and employee engagement increases.

#8 Celebrate successes

Success begets success; when success is achieved and employees are engaged, celebrate sincerely. The celebrations don’t have to be elaborate; clear recognition of accomplishments can be a great motivator. A public “thank you” is invaluable. Of course, chocolate chip cookies or donuts can’t hurt either.



Closing

We began this series suggesting that some of the downward trends reported in leadership series may actually be traced to ‘Leadership Distractions’: the things that happen on a day-to-day basis within organizations requiring leadership attention away from a leader’s focal points. We also suggested several forms these distractions take. We then dissected the distractions to shed insight into each. To leave it at that would be remiss. In our concluding article, we posit leadership components/activities we believe can and will minimize distractions. Please note, these components are not short-term fixes. Neither are they easily achieved. But, over our 30+ years of working with organizations, we have found that when a commitment is made to these activities, positive outcomes result.

We would gladly speak with you about specific ways to implement these activities, as well as relate specific experiences. If you have some examples to share with us we would be happy to hear from you.

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