Leading a process of change based on mission

Getting employees committed to a mission that is abundant in content, credibility and urgency takes a certain kind of "transcendental" leadership that is deeply rooted in principles and personal values. In their paper, IESE Prof. Pablo Cardona and DPM Consulting partner Carlos Rey show one method for achieving what they call "mission-based leadership." The authors have tested it out and they say it works.



January 1, 2008

©IESE Business School

Companies don't look for leaders and followers; they want leaders who will beget other leaders. Leadership is a skill now sought after at all levels of an organization.

However, achieving this requires a cultural shift away from the "selfish leader" approach that has prevailed for decades. It requires cultivating a new leadership style that redefines the established relationship between leaders and coworkers, and touches all areas of the organization. It starts by distinguishing three different types of leadership.

Transactional: based on a relationship of economic influence. Transactional leaders tend to be good negotiators, authoritarian, and use rewards and punishment strategies to motivate subordinates. Their management style is based on top-down management and a short-term focus.

Transformer: defined by a relationship of professional influence. These are enhanced transactional leaders, who in addition to incentives also offer their coworkers an appealing job that allows them to learn and get committed to the program. They are visionary and charismatic, great communicators and nonconformists who are constantly reconsidering things and promoting empowerment among their coworkers. This type of leadership keeps the power at the top and can be particularly problematic if the leader's mindset becomes an end in itself.

Transcendental: defined by a relationship of personal influence. The effect of transcendental leaders surpasses that of transformers, involving not only incentives and alluring professional challenges, but also appealing to the need of others for their job to be well done, due to their shared sense of mission. These are leaders with a firm commitment to the project, practicing what they preach and fostering leadership among their coworkers - in other words, leaders who beget leaders. They promote what the authors refer to as "ownership," which consists of conveying the sense of mission to their coworkers, at each individual's particular level of responsibility.

Mission-Based Leadership

For this process to be successful, the authors explain, there must be a "sense of mission," because only when the members of an organization share a single mission will they ultimately be able to share the same leadership. The leader - whether the general manager, executive or middle manager - is the one directly responsible for seeing this mission through. It starts with upper management and works its way down through the organization.

©IESE Business School

This process does not happen automatically. It requires a learning process for executives as well as the other employees, and a change of corporate culture. To aid this process of change, the authors suggest a model called "mission-based leadership" (MBL), which they developed based on their experience as consultants.

MBL is directly related to a mission and a set of values that go beyond the leader. Its structure is three-dimensional, based on commitment, cooperation and change.

Commitment: The leader must be personally committed to the company's mission. Only then can he or she convey that mission to their coworkers and make them feel part of something that must be brought to completion. To transform people's commitment beyond the ordinary, the leader must create a sense of urgency, define a set of specific challenges and demand that these be met out of this sense of mission. Naturally, the leader must be consistent, ensuring coherence between the various elements that make up the mission and striving for excellence in all of these.

Cooperation: The leader must go beyond individual interests and get the company's members to work together as a team out of a sense of mission. To make that happen, the first step is to identify interdependencies, determining what certain individuals need from others in order to carry out the overall mission, and brokering agreements between the different sides. Once that is done, it is important to follow it up proactively and constantly evaluate the service. This will identify emerging needs and also enable expectations and the commitment to the current situation to be adjusted at every stage.

Change: Lastly, it is important to be attentive to change, given that the skills and talent needed for achieving excellence in completing a company's mission evolve constantly, in line with the expectations and needs of the stakeholders. Transcendental leaders foster change at all levels of the organization. Once they have identified the needs for change, they must steer those through by means of personal change. After all, it is not the companies that are changing, but the people, and someone has to initiate this process. Once this is done, the change must be promoted among the personnel. This is where a leader becomes a true coach for the staff. This process culminates successfully when the personnel become promoters of change - in other words, when they become new leaders themselves. As subordinates go from followers to leaders, the leader becomes a leader of leaders, and a new cycle of change begins again.

While this model for generating transcendental leadership throughout the organization does not guarantee success, the study shows that it is possible and attainable at every level, if the

©IESE Business School

right context is there.

Nevertheless, say the authors, the transcendental leader must practice MBL in a sound and consistent manner, given that both people and circumstances change constantly, and the process will always need bolstering.

www.iese.edu/insight

©IESE Business School