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The Importance of Strong Leadership During Challenging Times and How to Get it Right

In a challenging economic environment, strong leadership becomes even more important as companies aim to maintain product interest, maximize profits and preserve (or improve) team morale. Regardless of the industry in which your company operates, an experienced and motivating leader or group of leaders can be the difference between meeting your business goals and missing the mark.

We discussed the critical importance of leadership with Mike Zook, Vice President & General Manager, North America Specialty Retail at Watkins Wellness, including his thoughts on becoming a strong leader and what leadership looks like regardless of the industry.

What is your definition of leadership?

Leaders should look to serve those they lead. Robert Greenleaf says, "It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead." And if we do this as leaders and pay attention to those we serve and lead, we should ask: 'Are they becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous? Are they more likely to become servant-leaders? Are the people you are leading growing as a person?' If you can see this in the affirmative, you are doing leadership correctly.

What makes a good leader?

A good leader is present and builds trust by knowing and caring for the well-being and needs of others on their team, and those within their sphere of influence. They are leading by example through a core set of values and ethics that are uncompromised in the face of adversity, as they let their mission drive their decision-making. Through this example, they can challenge others to grow and exceed their own individual goals and desires.

In your opinion, can good leaders be taught or is it something someone just naturally has (or not)?

I think good leaders can be taught new skills and can enhance their ability to lead because they want to learn. However, I don't believe those who want to lead out of ego can be taught to be a good leader.

Why is strong leadership important to a company's success?

Strong leadership is critical because leaders need to have the ability to foresee an event that must be dealt with before others see it. From there, they can act on it in their way, the right way, while the initiative is theirs. If they wait until everybody sees it, they have waited too long; they cannot be a leader – at best, they are a mediator.

What's the connection between leadership and a company's mission, vision and values?

All dynamic behavior is produced by a combination of reinforcing and balancing loops. Part of good organizational culture isn't just what we encourage to happen, but it is also what we allow to happen within our teams and our company. And part of determining this is to have a solid set of mission, vision, and values for everyone. Without a clear and strong MVV to lead and shape an organization's culture, it is left to individual chance, which usually is a collection of contradictory values that create separated loops that will distract from the collective goal.

How does leadership tie into or help promote company culture?

Leaders cannot simply make decisions that satisfy the needs of the organization without considering the needs of their people. As author Michael Cary says, "the needs of healthy people and the goals of functional organizations must be integrated in order for both to be productive." When you can marry these two goals, you can create a culture that is palpable and attractive to not only those within your organization, but everyone else.

Why is leadership so important in challenging economic conditions?

When challenging economic times cycle through, employees get scared, and they want to know that everything is going to be OK. They want to be confident that leaders are making good decisions to get the company (and them) through the challenges. Most employees want to know how they can help and be part of the solution, so being transparent about some of the challenges and asking others to help solve them is a great way to show leadership engagement. True leadership will stabilize and provide direction in an organization, which can maintain morale and keep everyone unified, moving in the right direction. It's not easy; in fact, it's very difficult because you must approach everything a little differently to see around the corner and anticipate solving problems. If you can do this effectively, you can give your team hope. And that is a more effective mindset to work from versus a mindset of fear.

How would you lead a team or individual during a challenging time versus a period of strength/growth?

During times of strength and growth, leaders (me included) can tend to become a little complacent with the way they manage the business and lead people. They tend to be more relaxed and are more satisfied with the effort because the results are there. But when the results are not there, leaders tend to get more focused, ask more questions, and are more concerned with how others are spending their time and budgets. Ideally, I work hard to be the same leader through a challenging time as I am during a period of strength and growth. Being able to approach leadership this way gives more stability and confidence to those you lead. Your leadership approach really shouldn't be different. Your leadership philosophy and approach should not change based on economic or business challenges.

Talk about the importance of a leader identifying their leadership philosophy. Any tips to do that?

I think it's imperative that anyone who wishes to be a leader think through, write out, and communicate their leadership philosophy on a consistent basis. Without a defined leadership philosophy, you run the risk of being all over the place and being influenced by trends and ego-centric thinking.

Start by reading articles and books on leadership. Allow others to help shape and solidify your thinking. Pay attention to what is important to you and the feedback you get from others. Then, begin to write out your own values, your dreams, your ideas. Refine those ideas. Simplify and sharpen them. It's an exercise that takes a thoughtful approach, but you will be surprised to find that you already have a leadership philosophy; it just has never been formalized and memorialized.

What's your approach to training new leaders?

I start by asking what their leadership philosophy is. New leaders probably haven't thought about it very much, so having conversations about what they value, what is important to them, and what are some of the healthy and toxic attributes that they have experienced from other leaders in their life. This opens a discovery for them to identify and define their philosophy and what kind of a leader they want to, and could, become.

Also, discuss where they think they need to learn and develop, and then create opportunities for them to take on stretch assignments to exercise a leadership muscle that needs to get stronger to develop that skill set. The reality is all leadership learning and growth are self-motivated. Someone must want to become a better leader by being a student of leadership and becoming self-aware of where they need to challenge themselves. You can only rely on your natural abilities to an extent, but we all have gaps, no matter how tenured we are as leaders. For example, some leaders are poor listeners, and most likely do not consider this to be a leadership skill. However, it is one of the most important leadership skills to have. Listening to others intently, receptively and with reflection is the beginning of great leadership.

How can a leader bring out the best in each team member?

Build Trust. There are two primary ways to do this. First, the other person should know that you care about them as an individual, their well-being, who they are and what makes them unique. Second, they should know they can come to you when they are facing a challenge and you can help them solve it. Not solve it for them, but help them to learn, discover, and build their confidence in their ability to problem solve.

Talk about a leader who stands out to you in your professional life. What made him or her so impactful?

Robert Greenleaf is one of my heroes. He worked for AT&T where he was the Director of Management Research. His job was to educate and train the leaders and managers of AT&T to be as effective as possible. He concluded after 38 years of experience that the most effective leaders were those who were not focused on their own power and wealth, but rather were focused on serving their teammates and customers. In 1970, Greenleaf launched the modern servant-leadership movement with his classic essay, "The Servant as Leader." He wrote several books and influenced countless leaders, educators, and authors. There is a *Robert E. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership* that is influencing higher education and future leaders. I like to say that he turned the proverbial organizational hierarchy on its head.

Does good leadership differ based on the industry?

I don't think so. Good leadership is good leadership and good leaders are good leaders. Of course, different industries have unique challenges and problems that need to be addressed, and good

leaders will learn and understand the industry specific challenge and apply their leadership philosophy and skills to that challenge.

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