

# KNOW WHEN IT'S REAL

How to create a foundation to lead

*"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say, 'Thank you.' In between, the leader is a servant." — Max De Pree*

**A**s most of us know, reality is overrated. We wish for things the way they ought to be. And our biases, of course, often push us toward a reluctance to embrace reality.

Yet, in order to be great leaders, we must develop the discipline not to let our desires and ambitions cloud our perceptions of reality. Whether defining reality is, as De Pree suggests, the first responsibility of a leader or not, we know that it is a fundamental aspect of leadership.

Describing the real world well creates within others the recognition that, as leaders, we are connected to the same planet on which others live. This provides the basis for others to trust us, which is essential if we want others to follow us into daily battle.

I would like to propose several key dimensions of reality that are important to define in order for our organizations to thrive.

## Identify who matters most

We need to define which of our external stakeholders matter

most to our success. We already know that every stakeholder group and stakeholder is important and needs attention and care. At the same time, some stakeholders, more than others, will define our moments of truth. Once we have identified that key stakeholder group, we need to find out how they *choose* our services and how they *use* our services.

How they *choose* our services refers to the decision-making process our customers/clients undertake in buying what we offer. This includes their perceptions of how we're different than the competition. A common claim, for example, is that we're different because of "our people." Is this what customers tell us? Do other companies recruit our best employees?

Having chosen our services, we need to understand how customers *use* our services. What value do they perceive? How do our customers describe the difference we make in their lives? Is there a pattern to the answers they give?

## Set the scene

We need to describe our current situation and the future state we're striving for.

Painting an authentic picture of where we are now will remind people that we're not wearing rose-colored glasses. Painting a vivid picture of where we're

going is essential in order for many of your employees to hang in there during the hard times.

## Define expected behavior

We need to be clear about the behavior we're looking for. As an organization, we can't be all things to all people, be it employees or external stakeholders. If we want leaders with a tough, confrontational leadership style, we need to define our leadership model that way. You owe it to your people to define behavioral expectations. The reality of "how we do things around here" needs to be clear.

## Know what really works

Finally, we need to be clear about what processes are really helping us achieve success for our customers. Are there things we do just because it's the way we've done it forever? Do our processes deliver the value our customers expect? Are they grounded in the way in which we claim to be different? Are our strategies and initiatives consistent with the operating principles of our business and moving us in the right direction? If not, something needs to change.

Marcel Proust said, "All the mind's activity is easy if it is not subjected to reality." Leadership is hard work. But the hard work is worth it when you lead an organization that, because you are grounded in reality, can reach for the stars. <<

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