

THE MAGAZINE FOR MANAGERS / LE JOURNAL DU GESTIONNAIRE

CANADIAN

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Leaders in Management — A Publication of the Canadian Institute of Management — *La gestion par excellence*

Vol. 36, No. 3 • FALL 2011



In This Issue:

WORKPLACE ETHICS

- 2011 AGM & Conference Follow-Up & Photos
- Ethics: The Key to Organizational Culture
- A Bird in the Hand: Keeping Customers
- Effective Managers
- Penetration Testing: Hacking Made Ethical
- Don't Talk to Strangers



Doug Williamson

What to Do about Bad Leaders

The world is full of bad leaders. Luckily for the rest of us, they are pretty easy to spot and tend to have limited impact because they generally do not have much influence or staying power.

The real concern should be with leaders who are not bad - they just aren't very good. These are the leaders who are in positions of power and influence, but who haven't chosen to master the mandate and yet, they still carry on with the role of leader - at great cost, often a hidden cost!

In the field of modern Organizational Psychology we can pretty much assess and label these characters with a high degree of accuracy, but measuring their negative impact has eluded us. There is some excellent literature on these psychological profiles and dysfunctional behaviours, but that is not the issue we are trying to address here. The issue here is the way in which conflict, tension and discord are managed, and whether or not the leader is able to create the environment in which they can be truly harnessed.

At the risk of too much generalization, we can say there are at least four things to watch for when it comes to ensuring that your leaders have the requisite know-how.

- Are they open to someone else's perspective?
- Have they come to terms with authority?
- How do they use their power?
- Are they able to look in the mirror?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no", then you have a problem and a co-conspirator in the intentional and wilful loss of economic value.

In putting forth the case in favour of tension, conflict and discord, the objective is to suggest that value creation is better served by mastering and embracing the necessary stimuli for creativity and originality, rather than trying to dilute them with pseudo harmony and a lowest-common-denominator approach.

*The question to ask is how can we possibly embrace such a radical thesis without destroying the very thing we are trying to improve?
It's a good question. Here are some answers.*

See Beyond Your World: Most of us are victims of our own experiences, many of which are too narrow. The secret is to embrace the experience repertoire which others bring, and use it to help broaden the tapestry of possibilities.

Draw Better Boundaries: Big, beige and beautiful isn't likely to be very exciting - it is more likely to be a crushing bore. As a result, we need to be willing to push out the boundaries of our imagination and play more comfortably with the ambiguity around the fringe.

Become Very Awake: Today, if you are not hyper alert, you are probably in serious trouble, but blissfully ignorant of that fact. When you wake up, you might be shocked to see the trouble you're in. A better-tuned radar system will push you to attention and open your eyes.

Practice Appreciative Enquiry: All great leaders have the ability to ask terrific questions - gut-wrenching, penetrating and deeply disturbing questions. These are the kind of questions that, if you can answer them, will create remarkable value.

Conduct Conscious Conversations: The art of good conversation is lost. We are either too distracted at one end of the spectrum or too concerned with winning at the other. In either case, we have lost the ability to raise the calibre of the conversation to meet the challenge of the moment.

Bridge the Divides: Making peace means building bridges - bridges of understanding and mutuality that can only be built on common ground and common interest. If we enter the debate with a commitment to building these bridges, chances are we will find opportunity.

Catalyze Innovation: If the answers to tough questions and hard problems were easy, we would already have them. The fact is, our traditional menu of choices is often too narrow, and the answers we really want are the ones we have not already thought about and that lie just outside our conscience.

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