

That Was Then – This Is Now

Awareness for the New Leader

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Michael is an excellent doctor. Impeccable credentials from the best schools, the right specialty residency and a history of success. Well respected by colleagues and patients for his technical competence - a smart guy who had earned the right to be successful, and he was. As a clinician and surgeon, that is.

Janice is a structural engineer by education and training. An on-time, on-budget maestro – well thought of by both peers and bosses at the construction company where she built her reputation.

Both of these talented people were known as leaders in their respective fields and that made it logical that they would each be great leaders of others and so they were promoted. The reality reminds me of an Ira Gershwin song, "It Ain't Necessarily So."

Both of these high achievers shared characteristics that made them successful: education and training; big work ethic; commitment to the organization and a history of results - good, well respected people. Seemed that they had earned the right to be responsible for what many companies call their "most important asset". Yet in both cases success did not come as easily as expected.

The Blind Spot

It is tough to lead effectively when you are always the smartest person in the room. It is tough to lead productive discussions when you already know all the answers. Good smart people don't like to play on a team where their participation and input is not heard and included in decisions. This blind spot was a huge challenge for Michael. His failure to hear and use the best thinking of others resulted in a bad decision that cost the business over a million dollars and an internal upheaval that took months to resolve. We all know people who truly are the smartest people in the room on specific topics. Watch it when behavior presumes that intellect and expertise to be universal. If you think this might be you, take a look in the mirror and ask yourself a few questions, "Am I asking others challenging questions that I really need to hear the answers to or am I asking questions designed to demonstrate my superior intellect and power?" "Do I listen to understand or focus on formulating my rebuttal to people who disagree?"

Accountability with Squishy New Authority

The general contractor model has been a consistent part of the construction industry. Sub-contractors work under direction of site supers and project managers with multiple companies and people playing important roles to complete projects. Sometimes it works well, sometimes not so well.



A hybrid of the model has migrated beyond the trades and is now common reality for many leaders/managers in tech companies and others outside of construction. The ability to assimilate talent from multiple departments, multiple companies from multiple countries and cultures has become an essential leadership requirement in many growing businesses. Setting these teams up to be successful at the outset and leading them to deliver is a unique challenge.

Janice was used to working in a well structured environment. She thrived as a team member in a system that had been built over years with trusted partners who played well together in the system and could be depended on to deliver. No ambiguity, do as directed, deliver on-time, on-budget. It's clean, and straight forward and no longer exists for Janice. Her new world required learning to function, make good decisions and get results with ambiguity as a persistent reality.

Her company's business model changed and she went from individual contributor to leader in the new model and had to start from scratch and build a new team for a small international project. The nature of the project dictated a unique and diverse mix of talent. Her team became known as the Melting Pot due to the cultural diversity and range of education, skills and experience of her small team.

Early on her team began to implode. Misalignment and poor communication, internal conflicts, resource allocation issues began to combine and escalate. Smart, anxious to learn, and passionate about success, Janice had the courage to ask for help pretty quick when things started to go south. She was aggressive in learning changing her perspective and applying new skills. She moved way out of what she was comfortable with, took huge risks and ultimately redefined herself as a leader. Janice earned the right to lead her team and ultimately the right to share the teams pride in completion of a tough but profitable project that made a huge difference for the people in the town where the project was done.

Both Michael and Janice were high achievers in their technical disciplines. It was a logical presumption that success would continue in their new roles and over time it most likely would. There are, however, specific perspectives, skills, and tools of high performing leaders and better ways to learn than Hard Knock U. Yet each of these good people had less education in how to do this job of managing/leading our "most important assets" than a security guard or forklift operator is mandated to have by law to do their jobs.

So, what is your most important asset? Is it your physical plant? How about your ability to move raw materials and finished product around? Is it intellectual property, or intellectual capacity? Is it your people? How would they know? What are you doing to maximize the value of your most important asset?

"It's not what you know that hurts you, it's what you know that just ain't so."

-Satchel Paige



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