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Futuristic Leadership: A case Approach

Much of the research on leadership development focuses on the individual who already is in a leadership role. But what would happen if the focus was on those in pre-management roles and helped leverage their development for future management and leadership opportunities?

Leaders who keep learning may be the ultimate source of sustainable competitive advantage. Increasingly, programs that focus on developing future leaders are seen as a source of competitive advantage (Hallowell, 1999). Xerox Capital Services, the administrative arm of Xerox North America Sales and a joint venture under majority ownership by GE, created the Associate Development Program to identify and maximize the company's talent with the objectives of:

- retaining high-potential employees
- developing bench strength of future leaders
- providing much-needed development opportunities.

Leader as Communicator

By better developing future leaders as communicators, and enhancing competencies around listening, writing, and presenting, leaders are more adequately prepared for their future assignments. Many of the problems that occur in an organization are the direct result of people failing to communicate, and leaders failing to understand this premise. Studying the communication process is important because you coach, coordinate, counsel, evaluate, and supervise through this process. It is the chain of understanding that integrates the members of an organization from top to bottom, bottom to top, and side to side.

An old Chinese proverb states: "From listening comes wisdom, and from speaking repentance." Numerous managerial functions require effective listening. All data necessary for strategic planning, effective decision making, and dealing successfully with personnel issues come through listening to co-workers, subordinates, superiors, and customers.

A study by the National Commission on Writing concluded that one-third of employees in the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as $3.1 billion annually on remedial training. The problem shows up not only in e-mail, but also in reports and other texts (Dillon, 2004).

Making effective presentations to groups or key individuals is a regular part of an executive's job. Delivering a clear, understandable message that gains the support of the listeners obviously requires expertise in public speaking.

Development programs that focus on enhancing a future leader's awareness of the audience, as well as increasing their confidence and ability in preparing and delivering presentations, benefit the organization as a whole.

Identifying Competencies

Now back to the Xerox case. Using the annual talent-management process, high-potential, high-performing employees were identified as participants in the Associate Development Program.

Core leadership competencies were developed based on research by GE on leadership traits and on the existing GE values. Those competencies were confirmed against research conducted by the Lominger Group and subject-matter experts in the multi-rater feedback process to validate competencies that could meet today's business demands and be supported by the business's vision and values.

After identifying and confirming 12 core competencies, modules were created to develop those competencies in an accelerated program with 20 participants. Interestingly, the majority of the sessions fell into the communication arena: listening skills, business writing, presentation skills, and leadership and communication.

Rolling out the Program

A special kick-off meeting introduced participants to one another, reviewed the syllabus for the next 12 weeks, answered questions, and distributed special logo items as keepsakes. To retain learning throughout the 12 weeks, the first session on leadership styles sets the tone for development. In addition to an instructor-led session identifying Myers-Briggs preference and Johari window for openness to exposure and feedback, participants completed many assessments on their own time. The participants discussed their leadership styles at the end of the 12-week program.

Measuring Success

Each session was individually evaluated for the relevancy of the course to the participant's development and future growth. In all cases, a 90 percent satisfied or highly satisfied rating was achieved. An assessment conducted mid-way through the program and at the end of the program evaluates employee engagement levels and future retention rates with the business.

Within 18 months, 61 participants graduated in three waves through the program and 15 percent were promoted, 2 percent took lateral moves in the organization, and 6 percent were assigned to special projects or rotational assignments because of their leadership skills.

In addition, 47 percent reconsidered going back to school for more formal education, 74 percent shared learnings with their managers or team members,

and almost 70 percent said that it had increased their self-confidence. In addition, costs were maintained by providing this program at a $500 investment per participant.

On a more qualitative note, many managers provided feedback that ADP participants regularly shared insights from each session with them. This resulted in taking some of the modules and developing more extensive leadership-development sessions for the first-line manager audience.

Employee Engagement

Results showed that 100 percent of the participants were interested in remaining with the organization, looking forward to future opportunities in people or project management, and said they would recommend this development opportunity to their peers who have a desire for career advancement.

Comments directly from the participants themselves indicate that "the impact from this program will result in better performance and great leadership." Another participant commented that "the leadership styles session helped me to interact better with my team, which increased effective communication to reach our month-end goals."

True leaders are futuristic. They lead into the future.

Futuristic Leaders are Verbs

They literally "see" the future and make it happen. They enable others to see it, motivate them to venture there, lead them there, reward them when they get there, and celebrate their collective success. They understand the A-Z of winning the future.
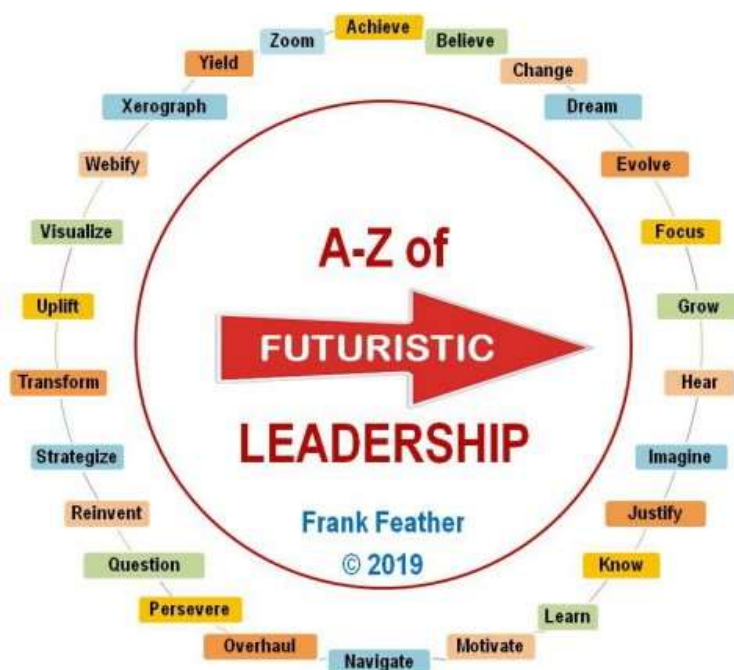
Futuristic leaders **ACHIEVE** results because they truly **BELIEVE** a different future is possible. They **CHANGE** their own and their organization's behavior, habits, and culture, in order to obtain their collective **DREAM**.

Futuristic leaders **EVOLVE** along the pathway to their goal — and also fully "expect the unexpected" along the way — because they unswervingly **FOCUS** on that goal. Aware that reaching the future requires that they and their organizations **GROW —** both mentally and spiritually — futuristic leaders **HEAR** things: they listen intently for clues and pieces of vital information that will guide them in that growth.

Futuristic leaders vividly **IMAGINE** what the future will be like, what needs to change to get there, and how the charted course might need to vary along the route. They **JUSTIFY** their mission, not only based on profitable returns, but in the proper ethics and values that will bring it to fruition. Futuristic leaders **KNOW** both what they know and what they don't know, and what more they and their teams will still need to know in the future. They constantly **LEARN**, day by day, decision by decision, as they move forward.

Futuristic leaders **MOTIVATE** themselves, and inspire those around them to do the same, to adventurously **NAVIGATE** previously uncharted territory. They **OVERHAUL** and optimize every available capacity and resource to help them **PERSEVERE** until every part of the mission is accomplished.

Futuristic leaders always **QUESTION** their advisors, their information, and themselves. Then they can best **REINVENT** the enterprise as they **STRATEGIZE** the most responsible and best possible future outcomes. Futuristic leaders **TRANSFORM** everything that needs changing, with highly-qualified teams of individuals. They **UPLIFT** them to **VISUALIZE** and drive towards their collective future.

As well, in the ongoing "Webolutionary" Internet Age, futuristic leaders encourage their teams to literally **WEBIFY** their organizations into value-creating networks, or "Biznets." Futuristic leaders also **XEROGRAPH** their own abilities and processes in others, to ensure ongoing growth and continuity through yet another generation of futuristic leaders.

Finally, futuristic leaders repeatedly **YIELD** consistent and spectacular results, and **ZOOM** their organizations speedily to ever-succeeding peaks of success. In sum, there are obvious interconnections between these 26 verbs. Futuristic leadership is a dynamic A-Z synergy of seeing the whole future — and then making it happen in the most expeditious and responsible way.

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