

Strategy: this time it's personal



Today's challenge is to take strategy out of the boardroom and develop more thinkers and leaders, says **Laurence S Lyons**

The author

Dr Laurence S Lyons is director of research of the *Future Work Forum* at Henley Management College. He is also a member of the *Drucker Foundation Thought Leaders' Forum*.

An AMBA Career Horizons provider, his latest co-edited book is: *Coaching for Leadership: How the world's greatest coaches help leaders learn*, published by Jossey-Bass, and is reviewed in this issue.

One privilege that comes from coaching top people is finding out what's on their minds. The problems these people face reflect the key obstacles we all come across in trying to do a great job in today's more chaotic work setting.

For some, the hot button is confidence: they want to feel more certain they are taking the right approach when working in a more turbulent world of work. Others wake up to find that – although they know they are doing a fantastic job technically – they have forgotten to manage their own reputation and discover they haven't taken their colleagues along with them. They find only too late that they are not valued by others as much as they think they should be.

Others simply say that they have progressed so far and so fast in their careers that they suspect they are missing something important. But they are not quite sure what it is that they are missing. The problems of Life on the Fast Track are all too familiar to AMBA members in particular.

All these people would benefit by grasping a broader perspective that will get them thinking on a level above the cut and thrust and away from the heat of the moment.

So what is needed in order to build up your confidence – not with Prozac but by minimising business risk? How do you make sure you are visible and not one day find yourself locked out in the cold? How do you keep alert to opportunities? The short answer is strategy. And strategy is getting personal.

Strategy once was the province of only a few top people in "higher management". In the past strategy was all about "the organization". All that is changing. Now the focus of strategy is shifting to individual people. There is a trend for strategy to become more internalised. Organizations in the new economy that don't adapt their culture to match the new work styles will not survive long in an internet, knowledge and service economy.

Modern efficient businesses are increasingly being built on networks rather than pyramids. Business success now depends on everyone being creative and innovative as we shift from running machines to pioneering relationships. Personal acuity has become the key to winning.

The PC placed power on everyone's desk. Today's challenge is to take strategy out of the boardroom and develop more thinkers and leaders. The central question is: what do individuals have to do differently in order to be equipped for this new style of management?

Seven strategy skills

The answer given here is a distillation of seven personal strategy skills that all leaders needs to have. These are the core strategic skills that individuals need to help them transform management into leadership. Of course, leadership covers more than strategy, and will include - among other things - setting a good example and acting with integrity. These skills – which support strategy - have been summarised from extensive experience in coaching executives at all levels and across all sectors.

1 Personal reflection This involves periodically standing back and taking stock. In a world of rapid change where plans may go out of date rapidly, self-reliance has to win the day. Self-reliance is built on an open and reflective approach rather than a reactive one. Reflection offers a rich variety of alternative patterns to help triangulate a person's situation and set it in a

perspective that allows freedom of choice and a feeling of being in control.

2 Instigating dialogue In a world that survives on relationships, on-going meaningful dialogue becomes vital. Dialogue engages each individual with others in a direct and effective way. When practiced well, it is dialogue that brings us face-to-face with reality and lets us try out our ideas. The breakthrough that moves dialogue at work from manager-subordinate to become peer-to-peer is called Coaching.

3 Seeking identity In these more turbulent times, the re-affirmation (or re-definition) of one's role must become a much more frequent activity. The "job description" language of traditional management is giving way to a much more dynamic interpretation. Within the network, one individual may take on several roles simultaneously, and an ability to understand and communicate one's identity forms a basis of the new peer-to-peer ways of working that are replacing the pyramid.

4 Getting agreement It should come as no surprise that the Art of Negotiating is a key skill in a world that is becoming more relationship based. Also under this heading is the ability to question before acting, to minimize the risk of failing to get buy-in after the event. One of the most important kinds of agreement is cross-functional. Simplistic stove-pipes simply don't work any more – in fact they often cause harm. The modern leader must be able to converse and understand the worlds of peers in a way that interfaces without causing overload.

5 Taking action Action makes the world go round. In a more uncertain world there is a great tendency for us all to let things slip and hope problems will simply go away. Without action, nothing happens differently. Taking action often exposes us to the possibility of making a mistake. However, failing to act may also be a mistake. A learning culture does not penalize someone whose actions are based on informed judgement. Sometimes the possibility of making a mistake is the only way forward. We must realise that we live in a more risky world and respond accordingly. To support this we need courage, confidence, good judgement and a sense of balance.

6 Giving recognition This is an extremely powerful leadership activity that is not emphasised enough in the traditional management style, and is a key to making strategy work over time. The dynamics that flow from appropriate recognition of a job well done are extremely positive and motivational to the individual and to the team. Giving recognition can also be one of the easiest skills to coach.

7 Ensuring follow up All our research shows that the impact of "closing the loop" or follow-up is enormous. It is one thing to say that something will be done; reality whether it actually gets done is another matter. The skill of following-up is a modern counterpart to "control", involving milestones, tests, and measurements. It is a piece of the traditional management style which has been re-interpreted sensitively for use in the modern business world.

These seven skills provide a framework for making strategy personal and appropriate to the world which we all have entered. There are a number of techniques for acquiring and sharpening these skills. They are very often included in a coaching for leadership programme.

a

Laurence S. Lyons © 2000. This article originally appeared in *The AMBA Ambassador Magazine* in December 2000. All rights reserved.