

Why Vision Based Leadership Fails

Abstract

Many organisations are making a transition from 'command and control' to systems based on mission, vision and values - principle based leadership. At its best this transition can transform organisational performance and produce sustained development. Frequently however it fails to make a significant impact and can even damage performance. At TDP we work with a number of clients in the public and private sector to develop the skills and behavioural repertoires that can help individuals and organisation to develop effectively.

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The Shift to Principle Based Leadership

In modern organisations operating in turbulent, knowledge based economies it is now widely recognised that traditional 'command and control' management

systems, characterised by central planning, management by objectives and carefully controlled implementation are increasingly ineffective, for two principal reasons. Firstly they are based on an assumption that the brains of the organisation are at the top - that the detailed knowledge for how to improve and sustain performance will come from an all knowing senior management, or policy making team - while in fact the people who know best how to improve products, services and systems are those who work with them, day in and day out. The second reason for its failure are the long time periods that centralised management processes require for decision making and change. In markets where success goes to those who can innovate and adapt most rapidly 'command and control' is destined to fail. As an alternative to 'command and control' many organisations are now making a shift to manage organisations through the development of a set of guiding ideas, or principles that are designed to ensure that decision making can

be distributed widely throughout the organisation in a way that builds consistency, coherence and co-ordination. The assumptions embodied in such 'principle based leadership' are very different to those behind command and control. Command and control demands compliance. Principle based leadership demands commitment.

An organisation's guiding ideas are usually embodied in three key components:

- **Mission** - what the organisation has been established to do;
- **Vision** - a 'rich picture' of a future that people in an organisation believe they can create;
- **Values** - the ways of behaving and acting that will help to move toward the vision;

The structure and role of each of these three components in driving organisational development is beyond the scope of this piece, but there is a key point that must



be emphasised. They are three complimentary components in a single system of guiding ideas. Mission, vision and values work together to guide decision-making and behaviours throughout the organisation.

Unless all three components in the system are developed effectively the resulting impact on organisational performance will be less than spectacular.

Why Transitions to Principle Based Leadership Fail

1. The Imposition of Guiding Ideas

Mission, vision and values are intensely personal, intrinsic qualities. Individuals own them. One individual or group cannot impose their guiding ideas on another. Guiding ideas have to be shared if they are to influence organisational behaviour. Failure to provide the opportunity for individuals and groups to discuss their personal guiding ideas, how they fit with those of other individuals and groups, and those of the organisation as a whole will win at best compliance rather than commitment, and at worst cyni-

cism. Where guiding ideas have managed to transform organisational performance it is because the process for developing them throughout the organisation have been participative, open and adequately resourced. This is not to deny that guiding principles can come from a single person. Many of the most successful organisations in recent years have been down to the guiding ideas of an individual. In these cases the individual has the leadership qualities to enable others to share in, and build their commitment to, the guiding ideas. The real acceleration of performance comes from the increase in commitment, belief and power from those who actually share the guiding ideas of the organisation.


2. 'Espoused Ideas' versus 'Ideas in Practice'

There is a world of difference between mission and a mission statement, vision and a vision statement, and a statement of values and values in action. Espoused missions, visions and values are just words on paper. Mission, vision and values in practice are embodied in, and

communicated through people, behaviour and decisions. One of the fastest ways to destroy morale and breed cynicism is to espouse mission, vision and values but fail to make them live in the organisation. Whatever management style operates, organisational behaviour is influenced by 'guiding ideas in practice'. Often organisation will develop statements of mission, vision and values that make no impact on the 'guiding ideas in practice'. Despite the production of the statements it remains 'business as usual'.

3. Failure to Manage Diversity

The reasons for failure discussed so far are associated with the initiation of a shift to principle-based leadership. The failure to manage diversity is associated with the development of principle-based leadership in an organisation. Guiding ideas start to spread and influence behaviour in organisations because they engender enthusiasm, communication and commitment. People discuss the guiding ideas, clarify them and start to work with them. This process clarifies and reinforces the guiding ideas as



people explore their impact on practice. However in practice there are real limitations to this spread of guiding ideas throughout an organisation. As more people engage with the guiding ideas they start to express their personal beliefs about mission, vision and values and there will be some level of disagreement and debate created. People may feel that the guiding ideas are set in stone and cannot be influenced, or that they have to 'give up' on their own beliefs and comply with those of the organisation. This diversity of opinion and belief and the reactions that result from it can lead to conflicting ideas and polarisation. Many organisations fail to harmonise this diversity and provide effective channels for it to influence and shape the development of the guiding ideas. Failure to provide the skills and resources necessary to channel such diversity into the creative process of developing guiding ideas will usually result in them falling from prominence - with the organisation slipping back into old ways of management and control. Managing diversity and harnessing it creatively is a key leadership role in the transition to principle based

leadership and individuals need the time, skills and opportunities to contribute effectively.

4. Unrealistic Ideas and Creative Tension

Transitions to principle-based leadership can also fail because of the perceived impossibility or naivety of the guiding ideas. As clarity about the ideas develops, so does understanding of the practical difficulties associated with bridging the gap between current reality and the future. People quickly become discouraged, uncertain and cynical with initial enthusiasm being quickly dissipated. The ability to maintain and control 'creative tension' between current reality and the guiding ideas is critical to success. Many organisations do not recognise this and fail to provide the resources required to manage it well.

5. The Dominance of Current Reality

The pressures and demands of current reality cause many failures, with short-term operational imperatives restricting the

focus on guiding ideas. There simply is not the time and energy available to focus on building the guiding ideas and there is an acceptance that they are less important than dealing with the 'here and now'. This phenomenon is often reinforced by managers and leaders who are actually much happier fire fighting than they are with managing guiding ideas. They collude with the need to focus on the short term and the operational because it allows them to stay within their comfort zones and minimises the personal risk that they are exposed to.

6. The Breakdown of the Organisation

Many failures occur because the guiding ideas instead of serving to pull the organisation through dialogue have the opposite effect. Because they are established and explicit we do not need to discuss them any more and get on with the job in hand. The existence of the guiding ideas actually reduces meaningful dialogue within the organisation and weakens interpersonal relationships, commitment and belief.



How Can Failure Be Avoided?

It is important to acknowledge that any transition in organisational culture is inherently risky and success can never be guaranteed. However the risk can be minimised. The first step in this is recognising the causes of failure and anticipating them effectively.

The checklist that follows indicates some of the interventions that will help to make the transition to principle-based leadership successful.

- Provide the time that is necessary for widespread inquiry and reflection about the guiding ideas.
- Develop the skills that will enable this inquiry and reflection.
- Promote dialogue but avoid evangelism - help people to build commitment to the guiding ideas without force feeding them.
- Develop coherence between personal, group and organisational guiding ideas.
- Promote and manage diversity in relation to the guiding ideas and

use it to drive development.

- Promote the significance of the guiding ideas throughout the organisation - legitimise discussion and debate.
- Ensure the even development of mission, vision and values throughout the organisation - do not over-emphasise one at the expense of the others.
- Pro-actively manage the tension between current reality and guiding ideas - this is a key leadership task.