Pull, Not Push, Leadership

Homily on the “tie” leadership challenge

While in graduate school, I was afforded an opportunity to serve as a minister at a small church in north Texas. The most fulfilling job of my career, I learned more about leadership in my service there than I have in all of the combined business roles that I’ve held over the past 15 years. Not only was the congregation full of some of the most kind and benevolent individuals I have ever known, a number were the wisest that I’ve met.

The most memorable lesson in leadership came one Sunday afternoon during a church leadership meeting. I don’t recall the exact circumstances, but I remember posing a question as to why the previous minister had been let go. William Brown, the patriarch of the church, took off his tie, stretched it across the table, and told me, “Push it over to me and keep it straight.” Of course, it was impossible, the tie simply bunched up into a pile on the table. He retrieved the tie and stretched it out across the table again and told me, “Try it again but pull it this time.” You can imagine the result; the tie pulled over in a perfectly straight line. There was a short moment of silence followed with Brother Brown’s unforgettable grin and raucous laugh. “There’s your answer,” he replied.

Leadership is a trait that is not so much an academic exercise but a learned skill; it’s not so much an idea but words and action. During my tenure in business, I’ve had a chance to work for and with both some highly skilled leaders as well as some relatively unskilled leaders. It didn’t take very long to notice that those who exercise “pull leadership” are significantly more effective than those who employ “push leadership.”

IT leaders are expected to exhibit exemplary leadership skills in working with their business counterparts, developing and managing their teams, and leveraging their vendor relationships. So how does pull leadership work along these three continuums?

1. Business alignment
Go to the business with solutions, not problems. And make sure you aren’t in denial of reality. Too
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IT organization, then you need to rethink your employee development strategy. Nothing can demoralize a team faster than if you talk career development opportunities but turn around and hire externally to fill the slots.

2. Staff empowerment

Building and managing a high-performance team is not an easy feat. Identifying and securing the right leaders is critical and an important starting point. Treat managers as subject-matter experts and empower them to make strategic decisions. When you do need to be involved, make sure managers help drive desired outcomes and are fully engaged. Further, pull them into the strategic conversation rather than pushing predetermined decisions and information out to them.

Managers should know how to do their jobs better than you; if not, either you are devolving into micro management or the manager may not be the right fit. And make sure to leverage their strengths for the larger good of the organization and provide as much transparency into decision making to not only direct reports but across your organization.

Ensure that everyone in the organization understands how success and failure are defined—from the corporate level, to each business unit, to the IT organization, to individual contributors. This helps foster ongoing engagement and engenders collaborative stewardship at each level. Failure to do so leaves managers and individual contributors rudderless.

Every individual on the team should have a development plan. Career development and opportunities must be given more than lip service. Specifically, if you are filling the majority of open positions with recruits from outside of the many IT organizations and their leaders reside in cocoons. Candid conversations outside of their silos rarely take place. As a result, perceptions that “everything is working well” and “IT is closely aligned with the business” are not often reality.

Decisions on a pull leadership team also do not occur within the four walls of the data center and get pushed out to the business. Instead, not only should business stakeholders be present at IT meetings when decisions are made, but IT leaders should be at the business table when IT decisions are formulated. Pull leadership not only engages business leaders for their requirements but for their ideas and recommendations; this only happens when reciprocal engagement occurs.

3. Strategic partners

Treat your technology providers as virtual members of your team—and expect them to act accordingly. Pull them into strategic conversations and provide them with business transparency so that they understand how you and your organization are measured and what success looks like for both them and you. They will assume greater accountability and engagement, seeking opportunities to enhance the value of the relationship by creating solutions for difficult problems, find ways to drive greater efficiencies and lower costs, and simply go the extra mile when needed—often without even being asked.

Also make sure to communicate to your technology vendors when they have reached the benchmark of a strategic partner. Tell them what that means, how this changes the relationship, and where the relationship is headed. Ensure that you have regular touch points for formal business reviews and conversations with them. If you don't have them today, get them. And for those technology providers aspiring to become strategic providers, let them know what is required for them to reach that status.

The “tie challenge”

The homily is complete, and the tie is on the table. How will you choose to lead when working with the business, employees, and technology providers? The challenge is whether you will push or pull.

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