CFAR

BRIEFING NOTES

Small 'L' Leadership Actions

The following tactics have been pulled from a variety of sources (see references) that discuss the challenges of implementing a significant cultural shift. In the midst of increased stress, we often underuse what we already know. Consider it like a pilot's checklist, to remind overloaded leaders of practices that increase collective effectiveness.

Here are the tactics:

1. Linking issues to the wider context
2. Dealing with the challenge of dual business models
3. Coping with ambiguity and complexity
4. Dealing with overload
5. Getting more out of meetings
6. Organizational work

1. Linking issues to the wider context

- **Think from the outside in.** If you were starting from scratch, with no legacy burden trying to serve a group of customers in your market, how might you design the experience and service? Steal/borrow/adapt ideas from other industries and systems. Who are key external collaborators or exemplars to learn from?
- **Time travel from the future back.** Invite people to think about the operative time horizon of the change you're trying to create. How long before there would be real changes in practices, and how will life be different from the past? What might be similar? (Gilmore and Shea, 1997)

  Have people imagine themselves at some future date, when the changes have been put into practice. What will be different then? What is a plausible narrative of how the organization got there?
- **In framing the task, invite people to link their own relevant experience to their story about the future.** Silos in the mind prevent people from accessing relevant data, experience, and analogies to the work at hand. Inviting people to recall relevant experiences outside of work as well as inside the organization—and analogies to the issue at hand—can make a history of the future realistic and tangible.

2. Dealing with the challenge of dual business models in a transition

- **Help people understand the potential contradictions** when two different business models (e.g. volume versus value) are in play, and adapt incentives thoughtfully over the arc of the transition.

- **Create a transition zone** to help people move from trying to live in both worlds at the same time and continually feeling inadequate in both, to a place that is identified explicitly as a "transition zone." Create explicit working agreements and guiding principles to use in the transition zone to help manage the contradictions between the past and future business models.
- **Keep the focus on the overall identity** of the enterprise and acknowledge the value of leaders and staff who are managing the emerging new way of working and those managing the resizing of older units or processes.
- **Hold and work through the tensions of the emerging and old business models at the top.** There is no substitute for leadership during times of major cultural change. When people see the top team working through tensions that come with every shift in how value is created by the enterprise, they know and feel that their leaders are taking on the difficult challenges, and not imagining they can all be delegated to others. They are always watching how their leaders act before they believe what their leaders say.

3. Coping with ambiguity and complexity

- **Don't wait for clarity**—Access colleagues and take initial actions that fit with the desired directions, and be open to modify as needed. Don't worry—you won't get it exactly right at first. Initiating momentum energizes people in transitions.
- **Start with best guess assumptions**—Pool intelligence from multiple sources in order to build a 'good enough' information base to act on. Think about the issue through the eyes of others to reduce your sense of uncertainty. Think back from the overarching goals/vision for guidance.
- **Look for 'found pilots' or positive deviance** where some aspects of new ways of working more effectively are emerging that can be learned from, encouraged, and spread.
- **Delegate and distribute the work** with responsibility and authority for accomplishing it wherever possible within broad guidelines. Make those guidelines clear at the beginning.
- **Connect relevant people across levels, functions, and sites** to increase information sharing and alignment, and especially to connect people to relevant expertise—particularly when that expertise lies outside their functional network.
- **Invite others to question decisions or actions and to give their best guesses about how to do things more effectively**—Normalizing that it is desirable to ask questions can diffuse resistance. At the same time, it encourage others to think out loud and collaborate with you and others.
- **Share deadlines, the process, and the participants** when you cannot share the policies or decisions. Process certainty can be very reassuring when content certainty is not yet possible. Organizational change abhors a vacuum, and process certainty helps keep rumors to a minimum by creating a plausible story.
- **Be as attentive to inaction/missed opportunities**—Errors of omission can often be as powerful as errors of commission. It helps to ask, "What are we not doing/thinking about?" on a regular basis. Asking others, especially those who tend to be "skeptical friends," can help identify what you're not doing and help anticipate unintended consequences of leadership decisions.

- **Invite and give feedback**, especially positive feedback—in real time and often—to keep colleagues co-oriented to the unfolding situation and to encourage adaptive behaviors amid the stresses of significant transitions.

4. Coping with overload

- **Create 'not to do' lists for yourself and others** of low value adding work in the organization to create bandwidth for the new and emergent. Couple this with delegating tasks to others within guidelines as discussed above.
- **Challenge delegation when you feel yourself in compliance mode** and do not understand how the work creates value and for whom.
- **Periodically assess whose work you might be doing** when it would be development for you and the other to shift to supporting them doing it with your guidance. Are you too responsive in ways that encourage others to give you their work? Especially during complex times when everyone is overloaded, people prefer an honest and rapid "no" to an ambivalent "yes" with weak follow through.
- **Think about sequencing**—what needs to be done first? What might be catalytic and unleash more energy and resources if accomplished before other things?

5. Demand more from meetings

- **Set the pace, tone, and climate.** Take a minute to set the tone for meetings, especially during turbulent times. Think musically about the flow—take time on important issues, move quickly on less significant issues. Invite people into the conversation who are hanging back. Check if there are felt stakes if the conversation feels flat. If the conversation feels flat, there's almost always an underlying reason—ask about it. Interrupt a pattern of Q&A between the hub (you as leader) and the spokes (each individual members) versus a conversation in the round.
- **Use silence.** Requesting participants to take a few moments to quietly jot down their ideas before addressing an issue greatly increases thoughtfulness and diversity of ideas, and forces more analytical thinking. Making each person do their own thinking helps control counter punchers who specialize in hanging back and then critiquing other's ideas.
- **Increase interactive communications and use multiple forums and large group processes to tap the 'wisdom of crowds' and 'mobilize minds'.** Create engagement via smaller groups, especially during large group meetings, in which people can safely try out their ideas and explore differences and similarities with others. This offers more people time to think and speak before the usual few people speak up in a large group.
- **Encourage dissent and diverse views**—Ask all members of a group to think on both sides of an issue—or—ask them to imagine how an initiative or idea might fail, in order to learn where the vulnerabilities lie in a proposed idea (like engineers testing a structure to failure).
- **Facilitate thematically, not by listing who wants to talk.** When groups take up important issues, often many want to jump into the debate and get stuck in a point-counter point exchange. Or, one person introduces a new idea before the current one has been discussed in greater detail.

Ask who wants to join and extend the initial idea or position, assuring others that after exploring coherently one position on the issue, you will invite others to take up another point of view. The person who was eager to get airtime can relax knowing they will be invited to introduce an alternative position or idea.

- **Ask people for summative thoughts at the end of meetings or working sessions.** Given how fragmented everyone's attention is, when they have been focusing for an hour or a half-day in rich conversations, it can be a powerful capstone to ask people to take a minute to jot down one or two key priorities from the conversation, and one or two issues that they think was under tended to. This gives the group much more information to guide the next steps. It sometimes helps to tell people they don't have to sign their names if they would rather not. We call this a "one minute essay."

6. Organizational work

- **Sense and test how people see your role.** Be explicit about what are and are not your responsibilities, the constraints you have, and help them see the difference between your personal views and what the role may require of you in particular decisions. Educate them about how the issues look from your vantage point.
- **Develop a shared language/short hand for clarifying roles and responsibilities.** Much of the significant work in major transformations takes place in ad hoc assignments, delegations, etc., that are often communicated quickly. Work to get a shared short hand that indicates how different roles or groups are involved:
  - A approve or veto,
  - R responsible for taking the lead,
  - C those who need to be consulted
  - I informed.

  This clarifies who is accountable for omissions—i.e., the person in the R role. Invite others to talk about how they want to be involved in a particular process or decision, knowing that if too many people are involved, it increases overload—and if too few are involved, needed expertise may lead to a poor decision.
- **Use and hold accountable the standing structure.** E-mail makes direct communication to all from a leader too easy, bypassing the intermediate structure. Make the middle management matter. Consider transmittal of key documents, strategic plans via the supervisory roles so that each leader has to explicate the implications of the policy or plan for his or her specific unit.
- **Be clear about one's level of authority**—Answer this question: "Can you make decisions on your own, or do you have to consult with others in your function or organization before making a decision?" If the latter, what are the expectations about back home consultation before making a decision?
- **Invite people to see themselves through others' eyes.** Ask participants in a meeting how a key stakeholder group, if they were listening in to that group, would see the blind spots or the strengths of ideas that have been developed. This prevents self-absorption and keeps the group open to the diversity of thinking outside of their membership.

Sources for leadership practices amid significant strategic and organizational change.

Capitalizing on Complexity: Insights from Global Chief Executive Officer Study. IBM

Embracing Paradox: The Challenge of Managing Innovation and the Core Business. Tushman, Smith, and Binns. Harvard Working Paper No 11-110 May 2011

"What to do against disruptive business models (When and how to play two games at once." Markides, and Oyon. MIT Sloan Management Review. Summer 2010.

Pairs and Triads: A Methodology for Effectively Working Together. CFAR and HR OD. 2005

"A Leader's Framework for Decision Making" Snowden and Boone. HBR, November 2007

Mobilizing Minds: Creating Wealth From Talent in the 21st Century. Bryan and Joyce. 2007

Interdependent Leadership: Driving Results Through Social Networks. Activate Networks

How Hierarchy Can Hurt Strategy Execution. HBR. July-August 2010.

Disconnecting Parties. Managing the Bell System Breakup. Tunstall. 1985

Small "L" Leadership. CFAR. Briefing Notes.

"Secrets to Successful Strategy Execution. Neilson, Martin, and Powers. HBR. June 2008.

Managing in the New Team Environment. Hirschhorn. 2002.

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