

## You Said You Wanted Leaders! Or Did You?

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Recently I was working with an organization to develop a leadership competency model that was to become the foundation for their succession plan process. The organization was in the middle of developing a new strategic plan and this seemed like the perfect time to be forward focused and prepare for their future leaders. Or was it?

The Director of HR for this organization, and one other executive were the cheerleaders behind the creation of this competency model and a succession process. We had a few of meetings with the remainder of the executive team. They were interested in the project, but they didn't see how leadership competencies and succession planning fit together in the same process. There was concern that a leadership competency model would create a bureaucratic process out of something they thought was simpler. Besides did they really need all these leaders?

The organization's new strategic plan clearly identified 'leadership' as a corporate value. Yet the executive team were not sure how a leadership competency model would fit into their management positions. I was invited back to the executive boardroom to facilitate a conversation around the difference between management and leadership. Since they had listed 'leadership' as an organizational strategic initiative, I had assumed that this organization wanted their managers to also be leaders. I am sure everyone has heard the expression about people who make assumptions! It turns out I had made the wrong assumption. I had not spent the time up front with the executive team discussing their interpretation behind the value they called leadership and what it truly meant to them.

What does this say about the organization's culture? Did this organization even want leadership throughout? According to Rosie Steeves (2002) of the Centre for Exceptional Leadership, it is important to be aware of how the culture of an organization may either facilitate leadership development or 'get in the way.' Steeves cautions that not all organizations really want leaders but rather more effective managers. So by identifying 'leadership' as a core value, the organization may not have really understood what they were asking for. According to Steeves, "Unless senior management truly recognize and embrace the behavioural changes that will inevitably develop ... an initiative will likely do

more harm than good.” My discussions with the executive team clearly indicated that they were fearful of leadership behaviours throughout their organization. They wanted a better management model.

So was this project a complete failure? I don't think it was. The executive team was pleased with the very candid discussions that they had around the philosophy of leadership and management. This was a discussion that they had never had before. Each executive member vocalized their personal philosophy around leadership and their fears around promoting leadership throughout their divisions. This was a very important discussion.

Going forward, if the organization wants to continue with creating a leadership development plan as part of a succession process, the entire executive team will need to be onboard. They will need to see the value in the process and how it will relate to the achievement of their divisional and organizational goals.

What else did I learn? I learned that language is not simple. A word means different things to different organizations. Take the time to fully understand their definition of a word. Assume nothing!

I also learned, that even if you have been commissioned for a project by a passionate group of supporters, that early in the process you need to have candid discussions with all the stakeholders throughout the organization. Everyone needs to have the opportunity to express their views and have their concerns addressed. Without their early support the project will stall. This does not negate the business need of the project. Once the key stakeholders have had their concerns addressed and they are satisfied of the value of the process they will be the biggest cheerleaders. Then the project is no longer yours, but theirs! They will want it to succeed too.

Reference:

Steeves, R. (2002). *Is Your Organization Ready for Great Leaders? Be Careful What You Ask For*. Retrieved March 8, 2004.

<http://www.exceptionalleadership.com/pdfs/article2.pdf>

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