

GOING BEYOND BARELY MANAGING

How easy and difficult it is to manage by reacting! Work and crises easily engulf you, and how hard it is to push against this tide. Yet when you take time to reflect, naming challenges, identifying underlying systems that need improvement and making plans to address even a few of these, you move from barely managing to leading.

First take stock of current challenges. Begin by listing the forces that are causing you to manage by reacting. Identify two or three that consume the most time and drain your energy. How many hours do you spend on these tasks? How are you currently organizing your day, week and month?

When I work with executives, such questions begin to reveal a picture of systems that need attention. For example, the director of a young non-profit was caught between a micro-managing board and a staff that needed constant supervision. Both demands required adjustments in systems. This director began to teach his board how to think beyond current grants and fiscal years; after several meetings, the board completed a strategic plan. Such discussions also helped the board understand their role as advisors. Next the director and I created a plan specifically for the director's work and carefully aligned with the organization's new three year plan. The director now guides the ship from the helm; the board has a plan to guide its work and to help them meaningfully monitor the organization's progress—without micro-managing the internal leader.

Systems problems also contributed to the amount of time the director spent advising staff members who were nominally in charge of programs. I've often seen employees who need (or seem to need) this help be blamed when a weak performance management system is at fault. Even when a person does need to be replaced, both the organization and employees are best served by also fixing the system that is the root problem. The director changed reporting relationships, set measurable performance expectations and made quarterly reviews systematic. Using the strategic plan as his guide, he created a strategic human resource development plan that helps him decide whom to hire and how to allocate resources for staff development.

In another case, a chief of operations was deluged with customer service complaints. After I provided training to create consistent expectations and reinforce excellent customer service behaviors, the number of complaints from both staff and customers did decline. Then the COO realized she could go further. We set priorities among several systems needs. Now the COO and human resources director are strengthening their manager corps to build managers who address problematic customer issues close to their source, as well as provide supportive supervision for a range of interpersonal and performance challenges.

Finally, an executive squeezed between Federal mandates and customer needs discovered how to expand his time by developing others as leaders. Like many of us, he found that his problem was not, strictly speaking, lack of time, but—an apparent paradox—lack of time out to reflect and make intentional choices.

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Attention to Leading

Questions that shift attention away from reacting and toward visions, plans, and priorities engender the habit of thinking strategically.

- Where would you like to take your organization?
- If you were leading the way you would like, what would that look like this year? This quarter?
- What are your organization's biggest needs right now?
- If your organization were leading in its industry, what would you do differently?

Change is Easy

In *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges says that change, such as changing a schedule or adjusting to new policies, is easy; whereas transition, that is, the mental and emotional work that goes into bringing about change, is hard. Take small steps: set aside an hour a week to reflect, look ahead, or work on one strategic initiative.

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