

High-Performance Leaders

They energize people and tap potential.



by **Howard M. Guttman**

IF NOTHING EVER changed, you wouldn't need leaders. Any team of managers would do. But, in today's turbo-charged environment, *high-performance* leaders are needed.

For example, when Jeff Erle became the leader of a top architectural firm, his presence signified change. As he observes, "You are in a fishbowl; every nuance of your behavior is under scrutiny." The new leader is engaged in a delicate minuet. While you're being scrutinized, "you are also assessing those around you."

At other times, strategic change creates new leadership demands. As Johnson & Johnson sought to reinvent its contact lens business, the question was: How do you move from a U.S.-centric business to a global enterprise? As Craig Williams, J&J Vision Care's director of HR, explains, their leaders had to understand regional differences, take down functional silos, create cross-functional teams, and implement a performance model that spawned product innovation.

Most of us equate effective leadership with the ability to handle crises, but new opportunities can also test a leader's effectiveness. Chico's FAS is a strategically focused retailer on a steep growth trajectory. Founders stepped back in 2003 and placed the company in the hands of professional management. According to Chuck Nesbit, Chico's executive VP, "The transition from an entrepreneurial environment, where decisions were made on the fly, to a multi-brand company called for an artful balance between maintaining the entrepreneurial spirit and establishing discipline."

Leader as Architect

High-performance leaders have an architectural flair. They have a unique ability to see the whole game—the blueprint—for creating a high-performance, horizontal organization.

At Dairy Farmers of Australia, for example, consumers were becoming more sophisticated and demanding. The sector was also witnessing dairy

production declining, international "farm gate" milk prices skyrocketing, and record global fuel costs. CEO Rob Gordon knew that business as usual was no longer possible. His "blueprint" was to create "an organization in which everyone operates according to a clearly defined set of decision-making protocols, where people understand what they are accountable for and then own the results."

Like great architects, high-performance leaders know that they can't go it alone. The first task is to build a top management team that is committed to the new blueprint. This means gaining the team's alignment in five key areas: strategy; business goals; roles and responsibilities; protocols, or ground rules for decision making and conflict



resolution; and transparent business relationships. This high-performance team approach can then cascade down.

The high-performance leadership model is radically different from the old leader-follower paradigm. It is based on the notion of the leader as the first among equals. In effect, everyone needs to take ownership of the business and lead accordingly. The leaders surround themselves with players at every level who are fully accountable for their own results, who hold peers accountable for achieving results, and who step up to hold their people accountable for results within their area of the business.

One high-performance leadership challenge is to change mindsets—beginning with that of the leader. As Jeff Erle stated, "The leader must put his own ego aside to allow others to make decisions." For others, this means changing the deep belief in being accountable only for your own performance.

Leaders of Talent

High-performance leader-architects surround themselves with people who can bring the blueprint to life. They answer such questions as: Who are the players, and what competencies must we develop or acquire to create a high-performance organization? What role do I play in bringing this about?

They are superb talent managers, ensuring that everyone contributes. This entails equipping everyone with a special portfolio of skills that includes conflict resolution, active listening, influencing others, giving and receiving feedback, and making decisions.

No training will stick, however, if leaders don't walk the talk. A leader who brooks no disagreement can't expect others to encourage dialogue.

There are times when all the training, feedback, and mentoring just don't work. Some people are just not prepared to play in a high-performance environment. They prefer to focus on functional self-interest, not the good of team. They prefer to operate underground rather than confront others. Or they fail to honor commitments. When they can't change mindsets, high-performance leaders change personnel.

Leader as Mentor

When the Chico's executive team decided to move to a higher level of performance, they used a two-pronged approach. They implemented a process for developing a new strategic plan and they created high-performance teams, beginning with an alignment of the top team. The next tier of VPs and directors liked what they saw and decided that they too wanted to step up to greater decision-making authority and accountability for results.

Now, says Chuck Nesbit, two years later, the VPs and directors are running the business. The senior team is free to concentrate on "where the ship is going, not how it's getting there." High-performance leaders engender confidence that by working together the organization will win. Who better to do this than a leader able to energize and tap everyone's potential? The high-performance leader is in command without commanding. His is not a leaderless team, but a team of leaders. **LE**

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