

Before Leadership: Creativity and Risk Taking

By Jacqueline Byrd, Ph.D.

More often than not when you read books and articles on leadership, you will hear leadership defined as the ability to create a **vision**, **anticipate** trends, walk the talk or be congruent in the way leaders live their values (**value-congruence**), **empower** and understand their own impact on others (**self-understanding**).

But before these competencies can be realized, there are two factors that are critical to the reality of each. These two factors are creativity and risk taking. So when I say, “before leadership,” what I mean is that before we can expect people to become competent in specific leadership competences, they need to utilize and increase their capacity to be creative and take risks. Simply stated, creativity is the development of new ideas and risk taking is the push to make ideas a reality in the face of adversity.

Let’s look at each leadership competency in light of the two before leadership factors, creativity and risk taking.

Visioning: Effective leaders are able to create a vision for the organization’s future; a vision that inspires people; a call to action with a shared purpose for all. Through such a vision, people in the organization grasp their relationship to the larger realities of the enterprise.

But without creativity, how can you create a vision? And how can you make a vision happen if you’re not willing to take risks to make it happen? A vision without creativity is dull and insignificant. A vision without risk taking never happens.

Value-Congruence: Leaders who are congruent in the way they live out their values are those that inspire people to follow them. A leader who uses his or her values to guide and motivate provide meaning to people’s lives within organizations. They become the standards by which choices are made. It’s easy to walk and talk your values when you’re not faced with a challenge

to those values or when you “fit in.” But if your values run against the norm, then that’s when creativity and risk taking are required. Leaders must take the risk to “walk the talk.” Or, they run the risk of losing their capacity to lead.

Empowerment Skills: Empowerment is not about blind trust. It is about giving those who you are leading responsibility for doing jobs and performing in ways that show your confidence in their abilities. The word empowerment embodies in it trusting your employees, trusting that they can be creative with new ideas—ideas that come from them, and concomitantly taking the risks to let them determine and drive the ideas forward without you micromanaging them.

Anticipatory Skills: Foresight is fundamental to leadership. An effective leader intuitively and systematically scans the environment for potential areas of opportunities and risks. The leader’s focus is on servicing customers (internal and external) in new ways, finding new advantages over competitors, and exploiting new company strengths. Anticipating requires looking outside your immediate purview—being on alert for new ideas coming down the pike and looking for creative new trends that may impact you and your organization. You must at the same time be

willing to risk thinking outside your paradigms and challenging your own mental models. Anticipation drives an organization forward. Looking for opportunities to use your creative abilities and risking to think outside of what has been to what will be the trends are keys to success.

Self-Understanding Skills: For a leader, self-understanding is critical. Without it, leaders may do more harm than good. Leaders must have introspective skills as well as frameworks with which to understand themselves and their impact on others. Leaders seek to understand themselves and what a risk that is, you must face, understand and make choices about your self given that self-understanding. Knowing yourself and being able to tell others who you are and what your strengths and weaknesses puts a leader in an extremely vulnerable and difficult but necessary place, probably one of the ultimate risks a leader faces.

So, what I'd like to challenge you as leaders to think about is if we have in fact been missing the boat a little to effect significant changes in our organizations by focusing on developing leadership skills and competencies before developing the foundation needed to foster these leadership competencies—creativity and risk taking. -

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