

Reprinted from June 12 - 25, 2009

CEO lessons learned

How successful business leaders operate

Whenever I watch an episode of “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” I’m reminded of the brilliant leadership lessons skillfully crafted by the talented series writers – how to empower and trust your team, manage diversity, resolve conflict and bridge cultural differences, and the power of the prime directive – values-based leadership.

I met four extraordinary leaders during a recent project who exemplify the values and disciplines represented by the crew of the USS Enterprise. Karen is the chief executive officer/founder of a health care company. Her company vision emerged while working as a service provider for a local health care supplier where she saw process inefficiencies and low service levels passed on to clients in the form of higher costs. As a Christian who believes in ethics-based leadership – you must always do the right thing (not that which is the easiest) – Karen developed a lower cost, higher service health care delivery model.

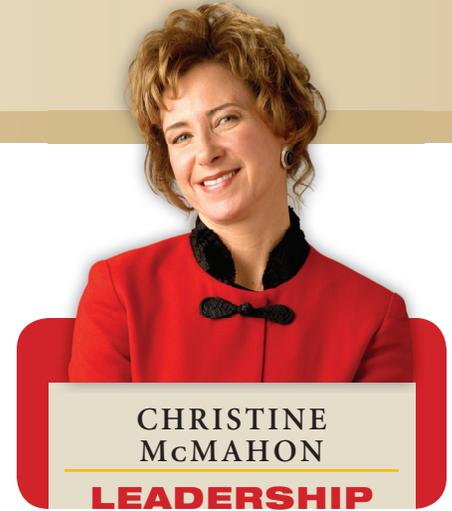
Deb, CEO and president of a plastics molding company, possesses a deep commitment to make our community better. Her leadership model follows the teachings in the book, *Gung Ho*, written by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles. Evidence of how she lives her values is apparent by the significant percentage of her workforce that mainstream America doesn’t want to deal with ... ex-cons, reformed addicts, fathers and mothers who have lost everything, including their children. She gives them a place to establish new patterns of behavior, rebuild self-esteem, and emerge with values and emotional discipline, which for many, is their first exposure to what it means to live with a moral compass. Many of her employees have earned their way back to being responsible parents

who are self-sufficient and can provide a loving home for their children.

Grant is a founder of a marketing firm. He is honest, genuine, driven, compassionate, “prays for wisdom every day” as a faith-based leader, and places a high value on family. He provides a flexible work environment to accommodate employees’ ever-changing family needs and issues. In addition to his CEO role, he also assumes business development responsibilities

and seeks clients whose business practices align with his values. He sees himself as a facilitator of human potential – to provide a fun environment where employees are encouraged and challenged to grow beyond what they thought was possible.

Mike is the CEO of a waste disposal business. He is a quiet man who possesses an unflinching determination to succeed. He is focused and goal-driven. He has learned the hard way that working 20-hour-days, 7-days-a-week limits business suc-



cess. Mike firmly believes that business growth happens when you hire competent people who want to succeed, trust them to make good decisions, and provide a forum for two-way communication.

These interviews were both inspiring and energizing. Here are a few of the lessons learned from these talented leaders:

Define your role and get out of the way

Mike said, “I need to invest my effort and energies where I am most valuable. It occurred to me that I have three basic responsibilities; look for opportunities to grow, have the infrastructure in place so the

“Leadership is about leveraging talent. Each leader above leads by example, not dictatorship.”

company doesn’t fall apart when I’m looking for and assessing growth opportunities, and create a sustainable and growth-oriented culture that can operate without me. Like a lot of things, you have preconceptions. To step away from the day-to-day micro details was both scary and freeing at the same time. I learned that people wanted to and had the capability to assume quite a bit of what I was handling but they were afraid to tell me that they could handle it. Now with every performance review discussion, I ask the

question, “What am I doing that you could or should be doing?”

Employees often have capabilities beyond their current job definition. Are you giving your team an opportunity to demonstrate their potential?

That leads me to the next point . . .

Hire right

Leadership is about leveraging talent. Each leader above leads by example, not dictatorship. Performance expectations are discussed, detailed in writing and followed-up with each direct report. Feedback is ongoing, not a once- or twice-a-year conversation.

If you are a time-challenged leader, a simple approach I offer to maintain open communication is to schedule personal success meetings. They can be scheduled weekly, bi-weekly or monthly depending upon the employee’s tenure and capability. The employee is responsible for scheduling the meeting and preparing the agenda which should cover:

- » What successes have you experienced since we last talked?
- » What challenges have you overcome?
- » What challenges are you currently facing?
- » How can I best support you?

Employees want to make a meaningful contribution to their business. As the leader it is up to you to create the forum for this to happen, and you start with . . .

Develop and communicate

a compelling vision

Employees often find themselves facing more than one option – they want to make smart decisions but which is the right decision? Each leader articulated “the vision” that all employees could communicate and understand how they contributed. Benchmarks for success were defined and when achieved, small celebrations honoring the achievement occurred. “The vision” was the centerpiece of their team meeting strategy discussions. But it takes more than just “the vision” . . .

Be resilient

Bad things can happen to good people. And each of these leaders experienced their fair share of difficulties and challenges. One CEO shared with me that their comptroller embezzled a significant amount of money, which almost destroyed the company. It took two years to stabilize the business before they could shift back into growth mode. Another CEO lost two of their largest customers within a month as a result of acquisitions – this resulted in a 40 percent loss of business. It’s the commitment to find a way and not give in to the pressure that sustained these leaders.

Grant made an interesting statement, “Resiliency is easy if you have one thing – conviction. You don’t achieve breakthrough results without some failure. It’s important to think like a child and not be afraid of making a mistake. At the same time, if you can test first and minimize your risk, that’s a great option. But time doesn’t always permit this. Sometimes

you just have to go with your gut and then reassess your results along the way.”

Roadblocks are ever present. Successful leaders find ways to navigate around them – their resiliency won’t allow them to fail. Replacing the “I can’t” mindset with “I can” is a critical step, and this is 100 percent supported by my last point . . .

Be a life long learner

Each of these leaders devoted time to reading and learning. One CEO gets up at 4 a.m. and reads until 5:45 a.m. daily. “I am constantly scanning, reading websites and books, magazines, etc. Every day, I want to learn something new.”

Another CEO, along with her leadership team, shares articles, information or industry specific happenings each week.

These leaders know they don’t know it all and value their employee’s insights and experiences. Because they are willing to be vulnerable, they open the door for their employees to talk freely and openly.

Being a leader is a big responsibility – but you don’t have to go it alone, that’s a choice. Involve your team, leverage their talents, communicate a clear vision and give people room to grow. When you step out of their way, you will discover the commitment, capability, creativity and resiliency that already exists within your organization.

Make it so! ■

Christine McMahon is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and consulting firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at (414) 290-3344.