

Maintain a broader vantage point

Get up on your ladder

One of the fundamental responsibilities of a leader is to bring the future to the present to prepare the organization to embrace new ways of operating. This requires blocking time to think strategically and determining how well the company and employees are prepared to meet the new expectations.

This discipline of blocking time – looking out at the horizon, identifying emerging trends, seeing new possibilities as well as the potential threats, and identifying how to close the gap between where the company is now and where it needs to be to grow – is what I call “being on your ladder.”

Being on your ladder is the time you take to reflect, think and ponder possibilities. It’s about investing time to identify and develop core strategies that will prepare the company for the future. It’s also about crafting the communications that will best rally the organization around a shared vision, so each and every employee feels she can contribute in a meaningful way.

Getting up on your ladder isn’t easy; staying on it is even harder. There are many demands that can jostle you from the perch. On the top of that list are team members who find it difficult to navigate the day-to-day business of business. Their pleas can be compelling, and too often so convincing that you come down off your ladder. Before you can step on the first rung to get back up the ladder, you are bombarded with a revolving door of requests from other people who want “just a moment of your time.” Short conversations turn into back-to-back scheduled meetings. Before too long, you realize that it’s been awhile

since you’ve been on your ladder.

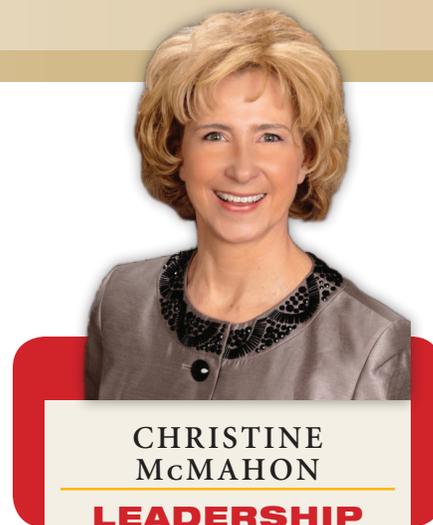
While it is important to be available and responsive to team members, it’s also important to assess why your input is needed. Do people need clearer direction? Permission to make decisions? Knowledge or perspective because they lack experience? Better training? More manpower? Or do they just want to connect with you?

Constantly coming down off your ladder with every request creates dependency. Employees learn that they can relinquish

their decision authority to you, and with that, the accountability for results. Over time, this can stifle initiative, organizational creativity, cross-functional communications and personal ownership for results.

Leaders of startup companies experience this most profoundly. As the company grows and becomes more successful, departments are created. Managers who worked side-by-side with the leader on a daily basis, when it was an all-hands-on-deck startup, now have their own departments to run. On the surface, people understand the new lines of responsibilities, but under the surface, they yearn for the way things used to be.

When the startup hits \$20 million, and then again makes the jump to \$80 million,



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leaders feel a constant tugging to come down off their ladders. This is not just about team members needing input or direction, but about re-connecting with the leader.

It’s not unusual to see employees who have helped the company grow during the initial phase leave the organization when it moves into growth mode because they are unable to adjust to the new ways of operating.

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It’s important to recognize that being on your ladder isn’t reserved for those only at the highest levels. Rather, it is a discipline that every manager can embrace. That broader vantage point allows you to gain a perspective that provides clarity around which are the most critical priorities and to develop the roadmap to accomplish them.

With the New Year nearly upon us, it’s the perfect time to assess how much time you currently invest in being on your ladder and what you want that number to be in 12 months. Be specific and set realistic goals for each of the four quarters. Then, develop a realistic plan for proactively addressing what pulls you down, and what keeps you off your ladder.

While you may experience some initial pushback, once team members see the amazing results, it's highly likely that they will form a tight circle around the base of your ladder and become the first line of defense in protecting you from non-essential matters. When this happens, it's confirmation that responsibility has been shifted to the proper levels within the organization, freeing you to focus on strategic opportunities that result in business growth. ■

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