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A SNAPSHOT OF IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS

Based on the advisory work of David Seregow, Ed. D.

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DEFINING LEADERSHIP – WHAT MATTERS MOST?

It's amazing—more than 3,000 books have been published on issues related to leadership—in just the last couple of years. Leadership is a hot topic, generating incredible interest in those who understand its importance.

For some, leadership has an almost mystical quality. Successful leaders are held in high esteem and often given—although wrongly so—the status of a guru, a philosopher-king, or a box office-busting superstar. Fortunately, this view of leadership is rapidly changing. Most professionals understand that leadership represents characteristics that all levels of management—and not just a few executives—should aspire to exhibit.

Companies are devoting considerable resources to developing more effective leadership throughout their ranks. But unlike most management characteristics, leadership attributes are less concrete and observable and therefore more difficult to define, develop, and assess.

So what is leadership and how can we develop this essential corporate competency?

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WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

There are about as many definitions of leadership as there are books on the topic. Here are just a few:

- Leadership creates in people an inner commitment to social goals and changes self-interest into a larger social concern. (Bass; Transformational Leadership)
- It's faddish to think of leaders as people who master competencies and emanate character. Leaders do much more than demonstrate attributes. Effective leaders get results. (Ulrich, Zenger, Smallwood; Results-Based Leadership)
- The leader's role is much like a symphony conductor's, ensuring that all the autonomous sections blend together harmoniously toward a single goal, inspiring others to say yes to the organization's vision. Leaders are culture builders. (Wall, Sobol, Solum; The Mission-Driven Organization)
- Leaders master the context while managers surrender to it. (Bennis; On Becoming a Leader)
- The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers. (Flaherty; Peter Drucker--Shaping the Managerial Mind)
- The leader serves to create new aims, tweak old ones, initiate new courses of action, and challenges the status quo, in the most diplomatic of ways, in order to continuously improve. (Caroselli; Leadership Skills for Managers)
- Engaging the hearts and minds of ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results. (Goman; This Isn't the Company I Joined)

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WHAT MATTERS MOST ABOUT LEADERSHIP?

Based on the above sampling of definitions, several themes become evident.

Leadership:

- Defines an organization's vision, or future reality, and demonstrates how to achieve it.
- Is not bound by the challenges of the current reality.
- Is results oriented.
- Inspires and mobilizes others to accept and achieve an organization's mission, vision, values, and goals.

OBSERVATIONS ON LEADERSHIP

Here are a few of my personal observations that I hope will help you build a manageable perspective on leadership:

1. **When the attributes and practices of leadership are combined with those of management, we create a more highly developed and more effective form of management—which I simply label "leadership."** There are very few leadership- or management-only positions in highly successful organizations. Leadership should be fully developed in each member of the organization's management team and at every level of the organization.
2. **Leadership includes both generic and business-specific core attributes and practices.** These attributes and practices should clearly reflect organizational purpose, guiding principles, and business strategy, which must be defined and accepted by the management team prior to their implementation.

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3. **Leadership is results oriented.** It successfully moves the organization toward the future reality while overcoming the challenges of the current reality. It tenaciously and passionately enables, inspires, and mobilizes the hearts and minds of others to accept and achieve the organization's mission, vision, values, priorities, and goals.
4. **Leadership effectively enables the development of critical corporate competencies**—focus, alignment, empowerment, and transformation.
5. **Leadership is expressed through individuals, teams, partnerships, and mutually rewarding stakeholder relationships.**
6. **Peak performance and continuity are achieved by ongoing leadership development and succession planning.**
7. **Leadership is best developed within the context of the work environment** with heavy reliance on action learning and peer and manager coaching and mentoring.
8. **Leadership initiatives should not be based solely on third-party programs and products.** These initiatives hinder managers from realizing their full strategic, organization-specific, leadership potential.

I hope these observations help you to put leadership into a more manageable context.

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