

Tim Mikkelsen
17 June 1995

Leadership

This is my summary and abstraction of the book “Flight of the Buffalo” by James Belasco and Ralph Stayer. This is fundamentally a book about team and organizational leadership through empowerment. The book is good, but describes key aspects repeatedly and through a lot of examples. (This is a good way to reinforce the principles, but it may get on some people’s nerves.) The book uses a buffalo versus goose paradigm. Buffalo will follow the lead buffalo. When the lead is killed, the rest of the buffalo will just stop. In the case of geese, there is a give and take and shifting of the leadership role.

The key approaches to encourage the empowerment in individuals are:

- Transfer ownership for work to those who do the work.
- Create the environment for ownership:
 1. paint a clear picture of great performance (org & person)
 2. focus people on the few factors that create this great performance
 3. develop the desire for each person to own their own performance
 4. align org systems to encourage great performance
- Coach the development of personal capabilities.
- Learn fast and encourage others to do so too.

So if everybody in your organization is empowered, what do you, as a leader, do? Leadership is more than just delegation. The activities for a leader include:

- Determine organization focus and direction, think strategically.
- Remove obstacles.
- Develop the ownership.
- Stimulate self-directed action.

As a leader, you need to coach the people in your organization. Some coaching questions to ask the people include:

- In the best case, what is great performance for your customers?
- What do you want to achieve in the next 2-3 years?
- How will you measure your performance?
- What do you need to learn in order to reach your goals?
- What work experiences do you need to help you learn?

The other key in getting things moving correctly in your organization are the systems and processes. These are the mechanisms that communicate values and directions to the people. So, the leader needs to determine the overall objectives, the information gathering systems and the reward systems. Some guidelines for these systems are:

- Make sure that performance measures address customer needs (customers include bosses, suppliers, customers and employees).
- Make the performance measures are specific and measurable (e.g. numeric).

- Make sure that the performance measures are visible.
- Make sure that the people get real time data on performance.
- Get the data from the customers.
- Assure the consequences of behavior - good and bad.
- Blend monetary and non-monetary rewards.
- Use the minimum number of systems and measures possible.

A key aspect of business success is the focus for you and the people in the organization on the customer. In the current business environment, what customers look for is a partner, not just a supplier. Some key questions to ask your customer include:

- Tell me about your activity.
- What are the few keys to success in your unit?
- What is your unit's advantage in the market and how do you contribute?
- What is great performance for your unit and for you in the coming year?
- What developments will change the way you and your unit do business?
- What are you doing to prepare for these changes before they occur?
- What are the biggest problems you face?
- What prevents you from being a great performer?
- How can we help you?
- What would I have to do this period to earn a perfect rating from you?

During the course of the book the authors put in key questions that you should ask yourself:

- What am I doing or not doing as a leader where I am taking ownership and leadership away from the team?
- How must I be different to be an effective leader?
- What do I have to learn to lead?
- Are the people in your organization becoming more capable?
- How do I look to customers?
- Are you a supplier or a partner?
- Do you know what is coming? Do the people in organization know?
- What will it really take to do what I really want to do?
- Do your products stand out clearly above the competition?
- What message do the organization systems send?
- Are you managing the past, the present or the future?
- What systems are causing the people in the organization problems?

If you are new to this, there are some symptoms that you should watch:

- Are you making all the decisions?
- Do people bring their issues to you?
- Do you jump in and 'rescue' situations?
- Are you an information bottleneck?
- Are you really adding value for your customers?

