

THE MACRIS GROUP

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From Dean's Desk:



Prologue

We experience several outcomes from our workshops. For our attendees, we hope they have gained knowledge and techniques that enable them to improve their leadership capabilities. We benefit from exposure to hundreds of different people with varying concerns and issues they deal with; across a broad range of industries. Over the years, we have compiled a significant amount of experiential knowledge, real world evidence and perspective on leadership issues. We are fortunate to have ongoing relationships with the companies and people we have worked with, thereby gaining a continuum of feedback, along with perspectives on evolving leadership challenges. Based on all this, we explore ways to expand our thinking and improve our offerings to our clients. Our 2016 series reflects this thinking and examines the impact of distractions on leadership performance, in hopes that we can help both individuals and companies to achieve higher levels of effectiveness.

Is Leadership Lacking or Just Distracted – our 2016 series

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Introduction

You've heard it many times: the declining proficiency of leadership and the perplexing reasons why. We, too are perplexed, and as we pointed out in last year's articles, find ourselves asking more questions than having answers. Instead of finding them ludicrous, we see the questions as the basis for discussion, where discussion yields thinking and thinking will ultimately yield insights. This approach is ultimately more productive than that of the leadership gurus who issue lists of leadership things to do or lists of the top ten etc. etc. The most recent McKinsey Quarterly features two articles: "Leadership in Context" and "Getting Beyond the BS of Leadership Literature." We have written extensively on a term we coined years ago, Contextual Leadership (http://themacrisgroup.com/docs/Update_Oldsite/Vol_4_Issue_0106.pdf). Fundamentally, we suggest that there is no Elixir of Leadership, (http://themacrisgroup.com/docs/Update_Oldsite/Vol_2_Issue_0304.pdf) meaning that the guru recipes for successful leadership are severely lacking and ignore the basic premise that one size will never fit all. The McKinsey Quarterly article indicates in its first paragraph that "The sheer volume (of literature on leader-

ship) is overwhelming, and the lessons that emerge from one leader's experience may be completely inapplicable to another's." The next paragraph states that "If only we had a clear set of keys to effective organizational leadership—a "decoder ring" to understand which practices produce the best outcomes" —the Elixir or an Answer Key. We all know that is not the case. So once again in search for the 'decoder ring' or an answer key is illusive, if not impossible. It is just like Ralphie in the movie *The Christmas Story*. Everyday he checks the mailbox for his Little Orphan Annie decoder. When it does arrive, he locks himself into the bathroom to decode the secret message from the last radio broadcast. What does he decode? – an advertisement for Ovaltine, the show's sponsor. Likewise, the magic answers in the latest and greatest leadership book are little more than promotions for the book. Just because something worked in company A does not guarantee that the same thing will work in any other company. The context is different and the people are different, with different viewpoints, and as we will discuss different distractions.

The subsequent article, Getting Beyond the BS of Leadership Literature, starts out by stating:

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The almost insatiable demand for leadership studies is a natural outgrowth of the all-too-frequent leadership failures in government, business, and nonprofits. Few people trust their leaders, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer surveys, among others.¹ Gallup data show low levels of employee engagement worldwide, while the Conference Board finds job satisfaction at a low ebb and executive tenures decreasing.² Other research consistently indicates that companies give their own leadership-development efforts low marks. Leaders aren't doing a good job for themselves or their workplaces, and things don't seem to be improving.

Not a good picture, yet consistent with historical surveys and findings.

We consistently try to provide a different perspective on the issues and particularly on the issue of leadership proficiency and quality. We respect the work of companies like DDI and McKinsey, and rely on their ability to reach much further than we can, to keep their finger on the pulse of leadership quality. We feel our strength is in our ability to take this information and digest it (along with our experience and network of colleagues) for non-conventional insights.

Training effectiveness?

Surveys of the 'condition' of global leadership and leaders, such as the DDI Global Leadership Forecast, indicate the declining quality of leaders; these reports also provide the not-so-encouraging amount of money being spent on leadership development programs. Obviously, the value proposition and return on investment are concerns, but maybe these leadership development programs are not as bad as the overall survey findings may lead us to believe. Why do we say this? Because we are seeing something rarely addressed in leadership development programs, at least not specifically? What we have observed are leaders who are distracted, and these distractions have the tendency to nullify leadership learning, in addition to myriad negative impacts on the organization and its people. In reframing the issue and looking at distractions to effective leadership, what we are suggesting does not address nor compensate for completely bad leaders. All of us have expe-

rienced one or two in our careers. We focus on the well-intentioned leaders across the management spectrum who want to be good leaders, who have the intellect and many of the tools but just can't seem to put it all together because they are distracted.

When we embark on a leadership development program we discuss the Kirkpatrick Four Levels of Learning:

Level I: Reaction

- ◆ Assesses participant's initial reactions to a course/program.
- ◆ Often called a "smiley sheet."
- ◆ According to the TRAINING magazine annual industry survey, almost 100 percent of all trainers perform "Level I" evaluation.
- ◆ This gives immediate feedback on the conduct of the actual training course.

Level II: Learning

- ◆ Assesses the amount of information that participants learned.
- ◆ Accomplished usually with a criterion-referenced test. The criteria are objectives for the course.
- ◆ Level II evaluation assesses conformance to requirements, or quality.

Level III: Transfer

- ◆ Assesses the amount of material that participants actually use in everyday work 6 weeks to 6 months after taking the course.
- ◆ The assessment is based on the objectives of the course via tests, observations, surveys, and interviews with co-workers and supervisors.
- ◆ Level III assesses the requirements of the course and can be viewed as a follow-on assessment of quality. This step unfortunately is often not done because of restrictions of the organization.

Level IV: Business results

- ◆ Assesses the financial impact of the training course on the bottom line of the organization 6 months to 2 years after the course
- ◆ Level IV is the most difficult level to measure. Most training courses do not have explicitly written business objectives, such as "this course should reduce support expenses by 20 percent." Second, the methodology for assessing business impact is not yet refined.
- ◆ Some assess this measurement by tracking business

measurements, others assess by observations, some by surveys, and still others assess by qualitative measures.

- ◆ Last, after six months or more, evaluators have difficulty solely attributing changed business results to training when changes in personnel, systems, and other factors might also have contributed to business performance.

Overwhelmingly, when our attendees arrive at Level III: Transfer, where they must put the material learned into effect within the organization, the benefits and learning from the training stop. The most candid respondents tell us there are organizational barriers such as managers who are not supportive of leadership learning, or who resist change. Those issues are topics for another time. On an individual level, we've seen attendees affected by distractions from within the organization. We believe for leadership training to be effective it has to be more than an event or a singular session. Our most successful programs have been longer-term programs, with periodic sessions and self-directed learning between sessions. In addition, organizationally, leadership programs must span the organization on either side of a target group. If middle managers are the target group, then those above and those below them must be part of the overall program design and feedback on the application of the training. This structure tends to break down barriers and legitimizes the training throughout the organization.

Why Distractions

As we began formulating our thoughts regarding distractions, things started lining up. A major factor on leadership effectiveness is reactivity within the organization. If the organization, department, etc. is operating in a reactive mode, then the distractions become the normal mode of business. This cycle is very difficult to break, yet we are confident many of our readers have experienced this condition. Considering the distractions within a reactive organization, the energy needed by a leader just to “put out fires” on a daily basis seriously impacts his or her proactive intentions and abilities.



Another factor can be characterized as self-imposed/self-created distractions. Leaders create many of the distractions that befall them. Some those self-imposed/self-created characteristics include:

- Micro-management
- Lack of trust of their people or their superiors
- Lack of ability to delegate
- Lack of Focus
- Poor decision-making
- Well-intentioned to a fault
- Unmanaged conflict – running issues/conflicts up the flag pole or simply ignoring and hoping they will go away
- Weak hierarchy that creates distractions rather than helping

We are going to address these distractions in more detail in our follow-on article. But for now, let's just look at one, “well-intentioned to a fault”, to try and show the impact of distractions.

Personnel conflicts are a normal course of organizational functioning, but when they occur between key individuals, such conflicts can become a major distraction to a leader. It can be as simple as two key people who just don't get along. Both have been good employees. One is close to retirement, the other is not. A short-term strategy assumes the conflict will go away once the older person retires. What the leader believes is his good intention is, in effect, passive-aggressive. It does nothing to eliminate the conflict; rather, neglecting the situation and the ongoing lack of cooperation becomes a distraction to the leader and other employees.

Another set of distractions are indirect factors. In these cases, the leader finds herself in a position of having to deal with the outcomes of processes, protocols or procedures that create distractions. The distraction is not a factor of the individual, but of the system the individual/leader functions within. Organizations gain a momentum and life of their own—sometimes we refer to that momentum as culture. Cultural considerations place demands on the leader's time and takes away from his/her ability to do the job effectively.

To highlight the point, consider the public utility industry before deregulation. In the utility industry, productivity

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was not a major factor—reliability was. Electricity is a funny thing, as long as it works and lights are on, there is never an issue. But when the lights go out, everyone notices. Within the engineering function of a utility, if a few people slack off for a while (and no one notices), they can quickly fall into slacker mode. Due to the lack of accountability, this slacking would typically go unnoticed, even as work became backlogged. The solution was to request more engineers, which, in most cases, the public utility commissions would approve. Extrapolate that out and one can readily see how organizations become bloated. But that's not the only distraction. The distraction grows when personnel issues arise, and one engineer feels that he/she is working harder than another. Or one person who has been in the organization longer gets passed over for a promotion and a more junior person prevails. Now a leader is distracted by a situation that institutionally could have been prevented. (We'll discuss this in more detail in our next article.) The leader now has to take time to 'manage' this specific situation at the expense of leading his group, department or organization.

How to manage distractions

Managing distractions will be the focus of the third article in this series. In our opinion, distractions are one of the most important factors creating leadership ineffectiveness. As surveys continue to describe declining leadership acumen and skill, and expensive leadership training must yield some ROI, the focus must shift to mitigating distraction at all management levels. By working the problem in a bit of a different way, the impact and effect of distractions on leaders can be managed such that leaders can be more effective. Since the majority of leadership learning is already in place, it's crucial to find a different way to integrate the learning into the context of leadership effectiveness.

Instinctively and specifically, managing distractions involves:

- Mission-vision focus
- Building the culture and trust within
- Setting personal goals (e.g. resisting the temptation to micro-manage)

- Building an inner circle
- Setting the example

So what is the new news here? This is all fairly common leadership fare. The issue is the integration of individual learning and application along with organizational awareness, cooperation and support. Sounds lofty, and in reality it requires a lot of hard work and a level of commitment at all levels within the organization.



To tie this together, let's go back to Kirkpatrick. For the purposes of this article let's assume that Levels I and II (Reaction and Learning) have occurred. Level III is still a work in progress, but the ultimate argument for managing disruptions is Level IV, Business Results.

Closing

Distractions, whether organizationally driven or stemming from the leader's personal issues, are impacting not just productivity but the effectiveness of leaders in a spectrum of roles. Distractions are perhaps the unrecognized factor that results in declining proficiency and effectiveness of leaders in corporations/businesses as McKinsey and DDI report. Disruptions cost an organization a lot, with both direct and indirect impact on the bottom line. Our follow-on article will delve into distractions in more depth and discuss how they are impacting both leaders and their organizations. Our third article in this series will discuss the costs, along with methods of how to manage distractions with an eye toward improving business results.

1 "2013 Edelman Trust Barometer finds a crisis in leadership," Edelman, January 20, 2013, edelman.com.

2 The data on job satisfaction come from Susan Adams, "Most Americans are unhappy at work," *Forbes*, June 20, 2014, forbes.com. The data on executive tenure is from *CEO Succession Practices: 2012 Edition*, Conference Board, 2012, conference-board.org.

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