

Leading Innovation

Creating Workplaces Where People Excel
So Organizations Thrive

Brian McDermott and Gerry Sexton



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Foreword

For almost twenty-five years I was a fulltime educator – largely at the Harvard Business School. I taught in the areas of Organizational Behavior and Change, Human Resource Management, Strategy, and Service Management. Despite the learning opportunities this experience provided, I was profoundly underdeveloped in the critically important area of leading innovation when I moved into my role as Vice Chairman and Chief Operating Officer at Limited Brands, operator of more than 3,800 stores and six retail brands, including Victoria's Secret, Bath & Body Works, Express, and The Limited. I know I was not alone in this shortcoming, because during my years in academia I had the opportunity to participate in field research in hundreds of organizations around the world and to work as a consultant with some of the most progressive organizations and leaders of our time.

In part, this all-too-common problem stems from underestimating or not contemplating well enough the overwhelming environmental shifts and competitive pressures that face our particular businesses or industries, which in my case is specialty retail. To a greater extent, this missed opportunity to grow and excel represents a profound lack of recognition of the powerful forces of homeostasis – the tendency of most complex systems to reach a state of equilibrium. The sense of balance that comes from operating in a stable environment is seductive. It masquerades as comfort. But it also leads to inertia – a powerful and limiting force.

Even the most talented and well-intended individuals, if they are enveloped by the contentment of the status quo, don't generally recognize their condition – or the ensuing risks that stagnation presents to their businesses. Management scholars and consultants label the phenomenon “resistance to change,” and prescribe countless varieties of “silver bullet solutions” to overcome it. But the true problem is unrecognizable and virtually indescribable – unless you have the language and insights to convey passion and unique perspectives about leading innovation effectively.

There is no question that the pace of innovation in modern organizations must increase. Unfortunately, there is ample empirical evidence that the strategies most often used to allocate resources to support innovation generally fall short. Investing in research and development is essential, for example, but that alone it is not enough. To meet the critical challenges of innovation, today's leaders must improve the *structures and processes of human interaction*. This book offers a significant, practical contribution to the leader's arsenal of ideas, tools, and tactics for doing just that, in all facets of organizational life.

Leading Innovation is a gem of a text that takes a strikingly different position about *how* to make innovation happen. Instead of focusing on overcoming resistance, Brian McDermott's and Gerry Sexton's LOOP Leadership approach builds upon a fundamental premise: the best route to creativity and innovation is through an inclusive model of leadership that brings out the best that each individual in an organization has to offer. They follow up with a wealth of intervention tools, techniques, and approaches that effectively tie to and support their model.

The underlying premise of *Leading Innovation* is deceptively simple – get people creatively, strategically, and energetically involved – but in reality, so also is some of the actual work of innovation. I encourage you to test out many of the intervention ideas in this book. I have little doubt you will see significant results as you help the people you work with take the lead on generating and implementing ideas for change and improvement. After all, that's the whole point of leadership!

Leading Innovation is destined to become an important contribution to the archives on positive organizational leadership practices. The insights and techniques you will find in this book can advance your knowledge and skill in this most critical area of leadership. Use them well.

Leonard A. Schlesinger

Vice Chairman and Chief Operating Officer, Limited Brands

Former George F. Baker Jr. Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School

Columbus, Ohio, USA

August, 2004

SECTION 1

OPENING THE LOOP ON INNOVATION

Chapter 1

The Art of Innovative Leadership

“No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.”

—KAHLIL GIBRAN

Leadership isn't rocket science. Our experience says that great leadership is far more complex than that – especially when it comes to leading innovation.

If you have people reporting to you, you know that life in the workplace can get complicated in a hurry. Sure, delivering cosmonauts to the International Space Station or landing a rover on Mars are complex challenges laden with millions of logistical variables. But imagine bringing together 100 managers from around the world who have been working independently and telling them they are being reorganized into one worldwide virtual team – and that *everything* about the way they have been working is about to change. This was the leadership challenge for a client of ours who wished she *only* had to land a probe on a passing comet.

Science and math at least provide verifiable theorems and procedures about how to rendezvous with moving objects in space. Leading people, however, is much more of an art than a science, and it's far too unpredictable to be accurately calculated by any algorithms we know about.

Perhaps the most limiting myth perpetuated in the world of business is that every organization encourages its people to be creative and innovative. People are, always have been, and always will be any organization's most valuable asset. There's probably not a business leader on the planet who hasn't said those very words. Your boss has probably said them to you. You've probably shared the same message in your own way with the people you lead. And we all mean what we say. The reality, however, is that many organizations systematically repress, neglect, or overlook – often unwittingly – the ideas, talents, and energy people innately long to contribute to their work.

Even with the best of intentions, actions often fall short of words. The result: Individuals exist, but they don't excel. Organizations survive, but they don't thrive.

Why?

Everybody agrees innovation is critically important. We talk about it – and people write about it – all the time. But the bulk of what you'll find in the media focuses on the need for it – often very passionately, with wisdom and commitment. However, what we want to address in *Leading Innovation* is specifically *how* you, as a leader, can make innovation part of your team's or organization's soul.

When you ask the people you lead to be innovative, you're asking them to do things differently, to change, to improve, to let go of the old ways of doing business – even if those old ways have led to ongoing success. You are inviting uncertainty, the risk of failure, and a degree of chaos into an otherwise relatively controlled environment. It's no wonder that even if we buy in on the concept, we send mixed messages and struggle with the *how*.

For some of the people you lead, your call for innovation will be the best possible news they could hear. They thrive on challenge and change, and they love the idea of unleashing their imaginations. They may be dying to stretch themselves. For others, this is news from their worst nightmares. They're competent, comfortable, and content to do what they've always done. They've got their jobs more or less under control, and they will invest plenty of energy to keep things that way. Your challenge is to harness all of the human potential that lies on the continuum between these two reactions and focus it toward your ultimate responsibility as a leader – the performance outcomes of your team.

That can be tough duty.

A critical, simple concept

The good news is that our solution for this complex challenge comes in the shape of a relatively simple concept: *Your success in leading innovation depends on your willingness and ability to unshackle the energy, ideas and talents that your people can – and want to – pour into their work with you.*

Marcus Buckingham, a researcher and a global-practice leader at the Gallup Organization in Chicago, considered this challenge in the groundbreaking work that led him to co-author *First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. One of those rules, based on studies with 100,000 managers in 400 different companies, is: “Stop trying to change people. Start trying to help them become more of who they already are.”

That advice, he warns, is contradictory to the natural impulse many leaders feel about the need to control every aspect of their operations. He told *Fast Company* magazine that “CEOs hate variance. It’s the enemy.” Buckingham argues that CEOs stamp out all variance – both good and bad – because it makes their jobs less complex and more predictable.

“There is, however, one resource inside all companies that will hinder any attempt to eliminate variance: each individual’s personality.” Buckingham says that there’s no way to eliminate the variations in human personality and get a perfectly uniform workforce – and he’s right, of course. But he’s also right when he says that’s exactly what most managers try to do: they try to standardize human behavior.

“Not only is that approach psychologically daft, it’s hugely inefficient,” he says. “It’s fighting human nature, and anyone who fights human nature will lose.”

The Gallup research shows that leaders who excel at getting great performance from the people they lead don’t try to re-wire people or try to put in what was left out. Instead, they try to draw out the gifts and energy that are already there, just waiting to be tapped.

“When it comes to getting the best performance out of people, the most efficient route is to revel in their strengths, not to focus on their weaknesses,” concludes Buckingham.

In *Leading Innovation*, we offer an uncomplicated solution for a very complicated problem. Not surprisingly, it comes with the caveat that “simple to grasp” does not mean “easy to implement.”

Open the gates for creativity

Letting go can be a scary proposition. That's especially true for leaders who believe they must be in control of absolutely everything that happens in their areas. But enlightened leaders know they must define and constantly communicate the endgame – the desired outcome – *and* free people to figure out how to get there. They free people to ask questions, challenge the status quo, take risks, try things that have never been tried before, and fail. In doing so, they create an environment where people excel, not merely exist.

There are exceptions, we are certain, but we don't know many people who go to work every day saying, "I'm going in there today to see how many things I can screw up."

For decades, 3M has been recognized as one of the most innovative companies in the world. Each year, the Minnesota-based company introduces hundreds of new products, secures hundreds of new patents, and brings in tens of millions of dollars in revenue from new products and services. That success stems in large part from a foundation laid by William M. McKnight, whose tenure at the company included serving as president and then CEO from 1929 to 1966. That's a remarkably long career by any measure.

In 1948, McKnight urged managers to delegate responsibility, and even to tolerate mistakes, to stimulate good people to take initiative in their work. He conceded in an internal policy statement that,

Mistakes will be made. But if a person is essentially right, the mistakes he or she makes are not as serious, in the long run, as the mistakes management will make if it's dictatorial

Management that is destructively critical when mistakes are made kills initiative, and it's essential that we have many people with initiative if we are to continue to grow.

Even in organizations trying desperately to emulate this philosophy, it can be difficult for individual leaders to create and sustain the kind of a workplace that consistently nurtures innovation. One of the first times we tested this theory, we asked sixty managers in a \$500-million division of a high-tech client company to conduct a walk-around survey as part of a leadership development process we created. We sent them out into their headquarters offices to get an instant read

on some work-climate issues related to leading innovation.

The first question we had them ask employees was, “Do you believe the average employee in this company has ideas that could help make us more successful?” The second question was, “Do you believe the average employee is regularly asked to contribute ideas to make this company more successful?”

The managers plotted their responses one at a time on a bar chart at the front of the room as they returned to our meeting space. It didn’t take long for them to recognize the gates for creativity in their organization needed a big squirt of oil on the hinges. More than 95 percent of those surveyed said they believed the average employee had ideas to help make the company more successful, but more than 95 percent also said they were not regularly asked to contribute those ideas. This disconnect, perceived or real, kills the very initiative McKnight believed was vital to cultivate. A 3M that didn’t ask for ideas would be a 3M that probably would have killed the now-legendary Post-it Note.

Relationships and involvement are critical ingredients

Two premises underlie the experience and advice we have to share with you about leading innovation:

1. Your ***relationship*** with the people you lead is one of the most critical factors in creating a workplace where people excel.

Nothing is more important in determining how long employees stay and how productive they are than the relationship they have with you, their direct supervisor. People do not leave companies – they leave managers.

2. One of the most effective ways to ensure productive relationships is to ***engage and involve the people you lead in important ways*** in your work together.

In nearly every employee satisfaction survey we have ever seen, challenging and meaningful work are consistently critical factors in ensuring people feel positive about the work they do. Challenge and meaning become clearer and stronger the more you involve people in the decisions that influence their individual work and the objectives of the organization.

It is that simple – and that complicated.

The LOOP Leadership Model

In line with those two underlying premises, we've created one model to organize the advice, tools, examples, lessons, and stories we offer to help you create workplaces where people will excel and help make your organization thrive. We call it LOOP Leadership.

“LOOP” is an acronym for four challenges leaders must address in order to lead innovation:

Linkage
Obstacles
Opportunities
Plans

It's no accident that the acronym we created to organize our thinking and teaching about leading innovation is built on a familiar old maxim: People want to be kept *in the loop* on things. In matters that are important to us, we all want to be informed about what's happening and hope we can be appropriately involved in decisions that will influence our lives. It is also helpful to think of the LOOP Model as a ring connecting the four steps and indicating the cyclical and continuous nature of the work required to lead innovation. Although the model is not linear, it is important, as you will see, to establish Linkage early on and to always conclude with Plans. You will also see as you experiment with this model, however, that you will need to constantly identify Obstacles and Opportunities and repeatedly establish or renew Linkage, no matter where you are in dealing with a particular leadership or business challenge.

Throughout *Leading Innovation* we're going to show you how to keep the people you lead in the loop. We'll show you how to:

- Create Linkage. Help the people you lead to understand your organization's business challenges, the roles they can play in achieving your most important objectives, and the benefits – for themselves, you, the organization, and your customers – of taking responsibility for contributing as much as possible to create the innovative solutions for dealing with those challenges.
- Assess and address the Obstacles. Identify obsolete policies and procedures, resource issues, mindsets, behaviors, and other factors that are inhibitors to innovative performance.

- Generate creative Opportunities for changes and improvements. Make operations and business practices support, not block, innovation.
- Make Plans and build commitment. Get people to identify and tackle what needs to be done to make innovation a way of life for your team, department, or entire organization.

The elusive “simple” answer

LOOP Leadership has proven to be a wonderfully useful model for guiding the leaders and teams we have worked with over the years. We’ve used the LOOP Leadership Model in our work with organizations throughout the United States and in Europe and Latin America. We need to acknowledge a paradox, however, before we get too far into explaining why and how this tool can be so effective at tapping into the passions, energy, and ideas of the people you lead.

LOOP Leadership is not *the* answer. It is no holy grail. And yet, here we are, suggesting that learning and using LOOP Leadership can change your life and dramatically change the team you manage. It can – but not because it’s formulaic, and certainly not because it’s easy.

Gertrude Stein, the American author who gained notoriety influencing the artistry of the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso, once said, “There is no answer. There never was an answer. There never will be an answer. That’s the answer.”

Some people draw a sense of hopelessness from these words, but this is one of our favorite and most inspiring quotes.

There *is* no single answer to any of life’s complex challenges. To believe otherwise is a sure course to disappointment and frustration. The method you use today to resolve a critical conflict between your organization and a key supplier or customer may not work in a similar situation tomorrow. It might never work for a colleague in another company. Although it’s imperative to build on our own experiences, and we can learn much from the lessons of others, it’s rare that a solution used in one situation or used by one business can be plucked up and dropped successfully into another.

There is something that is even more detrimental to innovation than believing someone else’s answer will work for you. It is believing that once you find an answer that works, you have reached an endpoint and can stop your search.

Colman McCarthy earned his international reputation as a syndicated news-

paper columnist writing for the *Washington Post*. More recently, he has been active teaching peace and justice courses in law schools, universities, high schools, churches, and in community settings. We heard him describe an exercise he uses that makes a powerful point about the need for and value of continuing to challenge the status quo.

At the beginning of a course, he said, he sends the students out to the nearest busy street, instructing them to count the red cars and blue cars that pass by during a specified time period. When they return he asks, “Did anybody think that was a rather pointless exercise?” Almost without fail, he says, someone in each group admits, somewhat reluctantly, that the instant he gave the assignment it seemed like a bad idea. McCarthy’s challenge: “Then why didn’t anybody say so?”

Fear, uncertainty, complacency and many other environmental factors play a role in McCarthy’s classrooms as clearly as they play a role in your organization.

Earl Bakken, co-founder of Medtronic, one of the world’s leading manufacturers of pacemakers and other lifesaving medical devices, concurs about the need for risk-taking and questioning.

In his memoir, *One Man’s Full Life*, Bakken says the scientific community tends to “think things to death, to demand too much ‘proof,’” instead of focusing on innovation and creative thought. People are paralyzed by the need for statistical certainty. He says all this has meant missed opportunities for business and for humanity in general. He writes that, “Most of the good things in my life and career have come to pass because somebody was willing to rush in where more careful folks were afraid to tread.”

To stop asking questions, to quest for and then settle for *the* answer, is to give up on change and innovation.

Leading innovation depends upon your willingness and ability to create an environment where questions are not only valued and respected, but also expected. The LOOP Leadership Model can guide the way.

Three hopes for leading innovation

As Kahlil Gibran’s observation at the start of this chapter suggests, our work is guided by a deep belief that all people are uniquely talented and wise. It seems almost criminal when businesses and leaders, instead of finding ways to facilitate the use of that talent and knowledge, create systems that undermine individuals’

own beliefs and confidence about their distinctive gifts. Sometimes the barriers are inadvertent. Sometimes they are more deliberate. In all cases, they are counterproductive to creating workplaces where people can soar.

We use the LOOP Leadership Model as a way to help organizations and their leaders foster the mindset and establish the management practices that truly tap into all the gifts people bring to the workplace. We also use LOOP to challenge the business realities that make us shake our heads in disbelief and dismay when we hear “employees are our most important asset” as words spoken but not values acted upon.

With all that in mind, we have three hopes for this book. We want to:

1. Raise your awareness about what it takes to create and foster an environment of innovation.
2. Stimulate your thinking about the innovations and changes you can make in your leadership style.
3. Provide a framework, models, tools, stories, resources, insights, and inspiration you can use to create your own unique action plans for leading innovation and creating a workplace where *your* people can excel, so *your* organization can thrive.

Remember, we’re not promising any simple answers. No silver bullets. No formulas. No prescriptions. No step-by-step instructions. No scripts.

If we do our job well, we’ll leave you with more questions than answers, and those questions will propel you toward an ever-evolving mastery of the art of innovative leadership.

SECTION 2

LINKAGE – CONNECTING PEOPLE, PROCESSES, AND PROFIT

Chapter 4

The Power of Choice

There are actually no such things as “skills.” There are only skilled people. And people – as inconveniently human as they may be – are what make any organization a success. Leading them, nurturing them and maximizing their potential are any company’s real core competency.

–LENNY LIEBMANN

LINKAGE – The Linkage phase of LOOP Leadership strives for two outcomes critical to innovation:

1. Help people understand your key business challenges and how their roles tie into dealing successfully with those issues.
2. Help people establish for themselves why they should take ownership for your team’s or organization’s key challenges.

There is nothing more vital to innovation than the power of choice. You choose to lead in a way that fosters innovation – or not. The people you lead buy into – or do not buy into – your need for them to play a role in changing and improving the way you work together. And they choose whether to play those roles with all the talent and energy they have or merely to go through the motions, contributing just enough to keep their jobs.

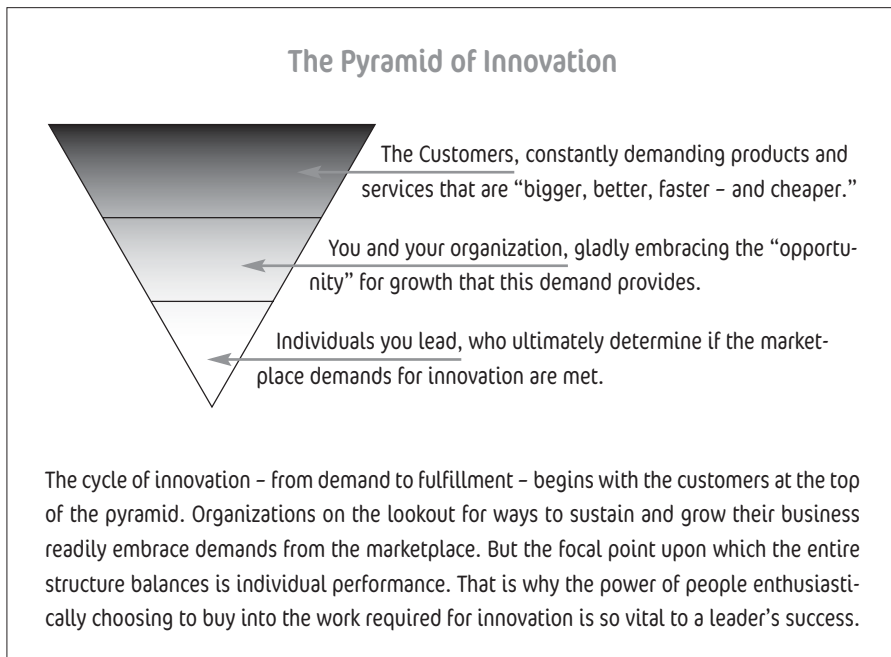
Why is choice so powerful? Because organizations don’t innovate. Companies don’t create. People do. And if people don’t choose to make innovation happen,

it won't. The cycle of organizational innovation, from demand to fulfillment, results from the continuous interplay between the marketplace, your organization, and the individuals you employ, operating as a three-tiered, inverted pyramid, which balances on the precarious point of individual choice and performance.

At the top of the inverted pyramid are the customers and the marketplace. They constantly demand that your company offer more choices, faster delivery times, customization, sexier options, better technology, brighter colors. You know the routine: Change, change, change. They want everything bigger, better, faster – and cheaper.

You and your organization are the middle tier of the pyramid, wisely and proactively embracing the challenge the ever-changing marketplace provides. In response, you reorganize, merge, acquire, centralize, decentralize, outsource, institute Six-Sigma, lean manufacturing, or do both – “lean-sigma,” etc. You know that this evolving demand from the marketplace is your opportunity to grow your business. You make the promise that whatever the customers want, your organization can provide. You have to, or else your competition will.

The promise can only be fulfilled, however, when the individuals who support the whole inverted pyramid, who together *are* your organization, embrace



Exercising Choice

We use this quick Linkage exercise to dramatically and energetically demonstrate the power of choosing to engage and how Linkage helps ensure success. We've used it with groups with as few as eight people and as many as 500. It has never failed.

- Ask everyone in the group to stand.
- Instruct them to walk around your meeting space and greet their co-workers, acting as if they have no interest in them, and as if they have far more important things on their minds.
- Stop the group after approximately thirty seconds. Congratulate them on their skill at demonstrating apathy.
- Now ask them to continue walking and greeting, but this time to greet people as if they were long-lost friends.
- Stop the group after about a minute.
- Debrief the exercise by posing these kinds of questions rhetorically or by actually discussing them with the group: If you had the choice of working with group A (apathy) or group B (energy) which group would you chose to work with? Why? Which group has greater potential for success? How would you prefer to approach a challenge – apathetically or energetically?

We've done this exercise countless times since first learning a variation of it from Ken Blanchard. It is always an energizer, and it highlights the difference between apathy and energy.

It's important to stop that first round of greetings quickly, to avoid putting everyone into a permanent funk. Stopping the group in this phase takes little effort. People are generally listless and quiet.

In the second round of greetings, especially with large groups, you may have to climb on a chair or table, wave your arms, or blow a whistle to restore order. It often takes a full minute or more to cut through the noise, backslapping, and high-fiving.

Even people who are uncomfortable going through this exercise "get it." Virtually each person can see what choosing Linkage, or making a commitment, can mean. Most of the work we do with groups involves us asking them to participate in dealing with the business challenge the company has asked us to address. We point out to people in our sessions that after this exercise, they will have choices to make. They must choose how actively they will participate during our session. They must choose how committed they will be in implementing ideas and strategies created during our time together, after they return to their regular jobs.

Of course, much more goes into actually making and acting upon the choice to commit than merely understanding the potential power of that decision. That's what makes Linkage, the first component of the LOOP Leadership Model, such an important and difficult challenge in leading innovation. Using a variation of this exercise to fit your circumstances can be a great way to kick off an important discussion about how to make significant changes and innovations in your team or organization.

the challenge of delivering what your company intends to provide.

We've witnessed situations, and so have you, where two people working side by side, doing essentially the same work, choose to see the meaning of their work very differently. One worker sees her job building neonatal respirators as "helping to save the lives of premature babies." A colleague at the next station considers himself a "tube hooker-upper."

Your challenge in leading innovation, of course, is to create a workplace with as many lifesavers and as few tube hooker-uppers as possible. There was a time when organizations were designed with tube hooker-uppers in mind as the ideal employees – replaceable, compliant, cogs in the machinery. Although we know that mindset hasn't been totally wiped out in some parts of the business world, we also know you wouldn't have read this far if you believed that that formula fostered innovation.

Ten leadership strategies for building commitment

You can't flip some switch for people to make them see themselves more like lifesavers than tube hooker-uppers. But you *can* lead in a way that makes your workplace environment conducive to people making that choice for themselves. You can create an atmosphere in which choosing to be a lifesaver feels right for most of the people most of the time.

How? Here are ten strategies our clients find useful:

1. Constantly speak to the *value* of the work you and the people you lead do. What difference does your work make to the customers and others within the organization? There is plenty of evidence that one of the most powerful job motivators is meaningful work. What is the meaning of what you do? Can the people you lead feel this? Would they describe their work as meaningful? Meaningful work has a cascading effect – from you to those you lead and ultimately and most importantly to those they serve.
2. Involve people early and often in changes that substantially affect their work.
3. When involving people in decisions and changes, be clear about the type and level of input and involvement you are seeking. Nothing breeds cynicism more than leaders who've already made a decision but go through the motions of asking people for input to create a façade of pseudo-involvement. Be straightforward. Are you simply looking for their insights about some poten-

tial options you are considering? Do you want to involve them in brainstorming potential options? Who will make the final decision?

4. Give people options whenever possible – in matters big and small.
5. Provide continual updates on how you and the organization are doing compared to the stated objectives. People want to know if they're succeeding.
6. Give them control over as much of their own work as possible. Tell them what needs to be done but not how to do it.
7. Create the expectation that when people in your team come to you with problems, they need to also offer their own potential solutions.
8. Push as much of the decision making as close to the team members as possible. People own their own decisions much more than those imposed upon them. Teach them wise decision making.
9. Delegate as much of the important work as possible. It helps people learn and grow, feel more a part of the process, and gain a broader perspective on your business.
10. Ask for and act upon people's ideas and opinions. This does not mean you need to implement every suggestion. But every suggestion deserves a response, even if it is a "no" and an explanation why you won't or can't act on a particular suggestion. If ideas end up in a black hole, they will stop flowing.

Linkage is your invitation for the people you lead to get involved, full throttle, in making your organization more successful. It's your invitation for them to become life givers, if you will, in the process of creating and innovating.

As you'll see in the next two chapters, making that invitation irresistibly enticing begins with your being clear about your mission, vision, goals, and objectives – and about your ability to create connections between the people you lead and the work that must be done.

Chapter 5

Communicating Vision and Priorities

This “telephone” has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.

—WESTERN UNION INTERNAL MEMO, 1876

Communication technology changes at warp speed. Imagine what the tunnel-visioned Western Union memo writer of 1876 would say about today’s Internet-ready camera phones, not to mention whatever high-tech gizmo is coming next. But while communication technology changes at a dizzying pace, the essence of true communication remains constant. The core of communication is connection.

When we talk about Linkage in the LOOP Leadership Model, we’re talking about connection that goes far beyond the electronics of phone signals or the physiology of sight and sound bouncing off retinas and eardrums of people in the same room. The main objective of Linkage is to create a broad-reaching sense of *ownership* of what your organization must accomplish. That’s because no single leader, no matter how creative or experienced, can innovate with the power, efficiency, or effect of a team of highly engaged stakeholders focused on making things better. The connection we’re talking about, this sense of ownership, translates into commitment, passion, and personal investment, all of which are secured at a much higher price than simply circulating a memo or making a speech to introduce top management’s latest-greatest success strategy.

Linkage is a vital early step in putting people on a track toward innovation or in beginning new projects. Your role is to help people establish for themselves how and why they need to be involved. This kind of connection begins with your ability to communicate a clear message about the work that has to be done. It culminates with your ability to help people come up with compelling and in-

spiring answers to the question, “What’s in it for me if I put my heart and soul into making this change or improvement happen? Why should I be innovative?”

Linkage helps you establish the benefits for people who choose to actively learn and do what is necessary to accomplish desired results. It lifts the responsibility for the challenge off your shoulders – as “the boss” – and shares it with everyone, giving you an exponential increase in creative brainpower.

Medtronic co-founder Earl Bakken says what many leaders say about this challenge: Communication is one of the most important leadership responsibilities. As you well know, that’s easy to say, harder to do. But he built his reputation as a globally successful innovator and industry leader by taking this responsibility seriously, speaking candidly, and insisting that others do the same.

In *Reflections on Leadership*, a collection of essays he wrote for Medtronic’s fortieth anniversary, Bakken notes, “Leaders are only as good as they communicate, because without effective communication, any grand plans, bold strategies, or ingenious tactics are lost before they can persuade and encourage the very people who need to know them most – the employees.”

He also warns that information too often is needlessly restricted to management, arguing that employees need to know how their daily work fits with the company’s product or service, its overall strategies and plans, its problems, and its successes. It’s worth risking such open communication, however, because “Inadequately informed, our employees are operating in the dark, or at least in a murky half-light, and thus susceptible to misinformation, misunderstanding, distrust, and resentment. If *we* [leaders] don’t answer their questions, someone else will, and we may not be very pleased by either the source or the answer.”

You’ve got to get people clear about what must be done and why, and you’ve got to get them to own the challenge. Neither task is simple.

How to communicate for connection

Our advice may seem painfully obvious, but the longer we work with organizations, the more we realize just how difficult it can be for some leaders to take care of the most fundamental management tasks. Common sense isn’t always common practice – and we’ve heard a million different rationalizations why some leaders don’t get around to communicating specific business challenges to the people they lead. None of these rationalizations undo the damage that limiting the flow of information causes.

The people you lead need to know three key things to perform well:

- Your company's specific goals and objectives,
- Your priorities for accomplishing those goals and objectives, and
- Your priorities for what they should be or are doing to help achieve those results.

They should be able to tell you, in their own words, exactly these three things. In particular, they should be able to describe how what they are doing right now links to the bigger picture. Try walking around and casually asking members of your team to do this, as a diagnostic on the effectiveness of your own communication. In our experience, the results are usually quite humbling.

The days of command and control management are, thankfully, mostly a distant memory. We know there are times when even the most enlightened leaders still wish they could say, "Just do this. Don't ask questions." But as a long-term strategy with a focus on innovation, it won't work. You must talk about and link your group's goals and priorities with individuals' daily tasks, regularly and consistently – in staff meetings, with project teams, in one-to-one performance discussions, standing around the water cooler. It's not an event; it's an environment, a condition, and a context for their daily decisions and actions.

Unfortunately, it is increasingly common for us to meet people frazzled by their workloads, frustrated by their inability to do anything more than take care of basic duties. Worn out by feeling locked into an unending cycle of having too much to do with too little time, they will numbly focus on the task at hand.

Surveys conducted in the US around the year 2000 point to some troubling trends. Productivity and revenue numbers were up, but employment statistics were down – more people were unemployed, and there was little job creation. Employees in all industries were feeling the pressure of doing more with less. As a result:

- 77 percent of workers were still going to work when they were sick, mostly driven by concerns about workload;
- 55 percent were feeling overwhelmed by their workload; and
- 45 percent were saying they would leave their current employers in five years or less.

None of these circumstances bodes well for creating connection or fostering innovation. In these situations, we have observed that much of the work force's creativity goes into figuring out merely how to survive emotionally – or worse, how to “beat the system” (it's also known as figuring out how to get paid as much as possible for doing as little as possible).

Looking for a remedy with one particularly stressed-out group of middle managers selected for a leadership development program by their bosses, we asked them to identify their top three to five job priorities. Then we asked them to list all of their typical daily activities. Finally, we asked them to match those activities to their top priorities. In this group, no one could narrow a list of priorities to only five, and the typical tabulation of activities looked like a grocery list for a hungry family of twelve.

These managers were unable to focus on their top priorities for one of three reasons:

1. They had never asked their leaders – nor had their leaders volunteered – to spell out top business priorities.
2. They had asked their bosses to spell out top priorities, but the bosses were unable to clearly delineate them because of a lack of clarity and priority farther up the chain of command.
3. They had asked about top priorities, learned there were enough to make several lists of five, and came away feeling frustrated, as if all those priorities were critical and not one could be neglected in any way.

It was clear that none of the participants in this leadership development program were satisfied with their own performance, nor were they thrilled with their work conditions. We strongly encouraged each of these people to sit down with their bosses to resolve the situation.

Over the course of several weeks' work, it became clear that few in the group had taken our recommendation. The explanations were numerous, but the common theme was that they and their bosses were too busy to make time to figure out why they were too busy. They weren't innovating. In fact, they consistently reported that they felt as if they were barely staying ahead of the next crisis.

Less than three months after the leadership program ended, more than half of this group was terminated in a “strategic” reorganization. Keep in mind that

these managers were selected for this development opportunity because they were all seen as high-potential performers. But pressures were mounting and many failed to adjust. With better Linkage, the percentage of those who would have been considered contributors worth keeping on would have been higher.

Priority Assessment Tool

Here's a tool to help the people you lead see how their daily activity supports top goals and priorities. Ask them to write key words that identify either your or their top three to five priorities on the diagonal lines. Then ask them to list their current projects and responsibilities. Finally, ask them to assess which priorities (if any) each of their current activities actually support. Use the tool to clarify goals and priorities, and discuss whether activities that don't support priorities are worth doing now, later – or ever.

Current Projects and Responsibilities

	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4	Doesn't support any top priority
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Keeping it simple

The critical lessons for leaders creating Linkage are simply stated: Make time to help people get clear about their own top three to five priorities in helping achieve your business objectives. Make sure they know what you are trying to accomplish and that they see specific connections between their own tasks and performance and the “big picture.” This will focus performance on essentials.

It's important to restrict priorities to three to five, because there are limits to what one person can accomplish. We're all circus performers spinning plates on the tops of tall sticks. If the ringmaster shows up with more plates after we've just

used our last stick, something's got to change before we can add another plate to the mix. An all-too-common response in the business world, however, is to crack the whip and say, "Find another stick." But with that mindset, it isn't long before plates come crashing down everywhere.

Depending on your own leadership role in your organization, you may also feel overwhelmed as your boss continually shows up with new dishware for you to spin. That can contribute to your own lack of clarity about priorities, which is certain to spill over to those you lead. If that's the case, you've got to ask for the same clarity from your boss that your people need from you. Only you know how many sticks you have and how many plates you can keep spinning. The same is true for the people you lead. The number is different for everyone. It's vital to Linkage, and ultimately to innovation and overall performance, that there is an opportunity to say, "Enough – we've got to reevaluate our priorities and how we are going to accomplish them."

Of course, most organizations have significantly more than five major business challenges to confront every day. We're not suggesting priorities numbered six and above don't matter or aren't truly important. But some things truly have to come first, or everything will eventually suffer. And often, once you successfully address one of the first five, you can move on to a new one.

This has clear implications for you as a leader. If you bring new plates to team members who have nothing left to spin with, you need to be able to agree on which old plates need to crash to make room for the new, or you need to design a new way to spin more plates.

At the end of the day, the people you lead won't feel very good about their contributions if they've spent big chunks of their time sweeping up the mess of the broken plates they couldn't keep balanced. They won't feel good about their situations if the message they hear is that *everything* is a top priority. People will spend their nightly commute wondering if they're winning the game. If the demand to keep all the plates spinning is relentless, and they are unable to determine if they're successful, then morale will plummet, performance will suffer, and innovation won't happen.

Communicating with personal commitment

Helping the people you lead to make the connection and creating the sense of ownership that translates into personal passion and commitment are the tough-

est parts of Linkage. The first step is to give people the chance to explore the question, “What’s in it for me, our team, the company, our customers, and any other stakeholders – if I get fully engaged in dealing with our challenges as creatively and innovatively as possible?”

Most important, of course, is “What’s in it for me?” A reply like “You get to keep your job” doesn’t cut it.

We usually spend time very early in our sessions working in small teams and then as a whole group to answer this question. For example, in a group being charged to come up with creative ways to restructure the functional operations within their department, we ask the teams to work together to create a list of the benefits they see to making the restructuring as successful as possible. We ask the small teams to share and compare their lists, and then we ask, “Are there enough benefits for you to say ‘Yes’ to this challenge?”

If the answer is “Yes,” we’re ready to move forward. If the answer indicates any resistance or reluctance, we explore what’s missing. We ask about what problems exist or what reservations people feel. There is no sense going through any more effort to design changes if, in the end, there is not enough personal incentive for people to follow through on the proposed modifications.

One of the most effective ways to earn commitment and passion, however, is to demonstrate it with your own behavior.

Maggie Hughes, retired president and chief administrative officer of Allianz Life Insurance Company of North America, says, “You need to provide clear direction to people and get their input. But respect, appreciation, doing ‘the right thing’ for all stakeholders, and compassion are also essential in creating an environment of innovation.”

That philosophy was never more tested – nor more valuable – than when, as part of the executive management team responsible for operations, she oversaw the merger of two financial service companies, Life USA Insurance Company and Allianz Life Insurance, to create Allianz Life. She had been one of the early employees of Life USA, known as an entrepreneurial company and recognized because of its unique culture and innovative products. Allianz, one of the largest financial services company in the world, came into the deal as a “traditional business giant,” she says.

One of Hughes’ goals when helping to build the operations of Life USA originally was to implement a “corporate commune” that would foster uniqueness,

innovation, idealism, and create a true sense of employee ownership – literally and figuratively. She believes the spirit caught on, in large part, because “the leaders really worked to know every person in the company and to put them in places where they could succeed and grow. We had so few people for the amount of work that had to be done, we had to do things this way. We had to go the extra mile to nurture people, but it paid off. The result was that we created new products in an old industry, and we assured individual opportunities were there for every employee owner. A high school graduate working her way through the ranks into a senior executive position was not unusual.”

It is Hughes’ experience that good things happen when leaders really care about the people they lead. “But you have to care at a personal values level.” She demonstrated her care by mentoring an employee council to give a high-level voice to employee concerns and ideas for improving everything from products and operations to marketing and management. She encouraged a “step-in step-out” program that allowed people to temporarily trade jobs – and points of view. And she created “Mornings with Maggie,” which allowed five to six employees at a time to accompany her through a normal workday for a few hours to experience the company from her perspective.

“They got to watch everything that was going on, including conflicts between vice presidents. It was totally open,” she says.

Another example was when Hughes, along with the rest of the executive management team, intervened in a mandatory training that was being planned around “insider trading issues” just before Life USA began publicly trading its stock on NASDAQ. The traditional path would have been to train a dozen or so high-profile “key personnel” in such issues. But given that Life USA was an employee-owned company where, in the early years, every employee invested 10 percent of his or her salary in the company, leaders agreed everyone needed to be educated about what was considered insider information and how the market worked. She was adamant that training “key personnel” at Life USA include all 300 employee-owners.

“At Life USA, we created a high-performance environment because everyone was in the loop. We were an orchestra. It was just my job to conduct the symphony.”

When the merger with Allianz occurred, Hughes’ challenge was to help bring together three hundred managers from both organizations – “a mix of the tradi-

tional ‘suits’ and the entrepreneurs who didn’t even own suits” – and lay out all the issues. “And there were about six hundred issues identified by employee task forces. Issues related to business, interaction, policies, management structure ... anything you can imagine.

“Both cultures knew we needed to change and become something entirely new. Life USA was a ‘cool’ company, open, innovative. Allianz had a long, traditional history.” Ultimately she believed that the new, bigger company could be as innovative as Life USA had been on its own, but would require institutionalizing some of what came naturally in the smaller organization.

“I had to deal with some personal biases about large conservative companies, but I knew Allianz had fabulous people. I knew there would be opportunities for them to share their wisdom. And I knew the entrepreneurs at Life USA had new ideas to share.”

In any organization, she says, “Linkage is about teaching people that they can make things happen. You have to give them information. You don’t talk about deals prematurely, but as soon as they are solid you let people know. My philosophy is that you ask everybody you know for help, and you tell everybody everything you know. You have to. Everything changes. Things move so fast that without a good base of shared information you can’t have long-term success.”

Caring and sharing

Tim Staley, a district vice president for the YMCA, agrees that caring and sharing is critical to Linkage.

“One of our core values in serving the community is caring, and the culture within the Y is that we care about the people who work with us. They are part of who we are. In fact, we’ve been criticized at times about giving people too many chances. But one of the things that attracts and inspires people to work with us is that the environment is so healthy, respectful, and truly team oriented. In some business situations, people always know who ‘the boss’ *really* is, even when they talk about working in teams.”

That doesn’t inspire Linkage.

Far more effective for Staley is making sure everybody feels like a major player.

“When I’m dealing with junior staff members, it doesn’t do much for me to watch them work and say, ‘I’ve done what you are doing.’ That’s never enough. Telling them that I cleaned toilets like them in the past doesn’t help us connect.

What makes a difference is when I show them that I am still willing to do that today with them, if that's what needs to get done. Saying, 'I will help you get this done,' is better than saying, 'I'm proof that you can get through this.'

"It's not enough that I have done daycare programs in my facilities for twelve years, or that I have gone through the complicated process to license programs. What matters to that staff is that I spend time in the daycare . . . that I talk to the teachers about their day, that I sit on the floor and play with the kids. I can't do it all day long, but when I am in there it really makes a difference to prove that I am involved."

People see through leaders who are insincere in their efforts to create Linkage. But as Hughes, Staley, and others have found, workers in the loop rise in support for leaders they know are genuinely committed to connecting their personal success to the success of the organization.

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