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Coaching for Strategic Leadership

by Jan Austin

Jan Austin is a master coach and leadership strategist. Her book, What No One Ever Tells You about Leading for Results, is scheduled for November 2006 release by Kaplan Publishing.

The business landscape is unquestionably more complex today, and organizational leaders are tasked to deliver results in an environment that might best be described as continuous whitewater.

The upshot: strategic leadership has taken on a whole new meaning. For many leaders, there is a significant gap between what qualified them as successful at earlier stages of their careers and what will make them effective in today's environment. There are few roadmaps to guide the intrepid. That's because much of what leaders need to know to lead effectively isn't written in management textbooks.

Moreover, the personal attributes of effective leaders and many of the real-world applied skills aren't taught in leadership courses, and they aren't typically explicitly communicated in organizations. It's no surprise then that the demand for executive coaching is on the rise. Coaching supports strategic leadership in several key ways: making the tactical to strategic leap; developing leadership presence; developing talent as a strategic asset; and making strategic leadership a continuous learning process.

The Tactical to Strategic Leap

A sharply narrowed planning horizon, increased competition for a global customer base, and leaner organizational structures have placed more demands on leaders at every level to adopt an enterprise orientation. Coaching supports leaders to make the shift from focusing locally to focusing cross-functionally on the work of the organization. Coaching helps to make explicit what's needed to be successful in balancing mission-critical objectives with day-to-day operations. Coaching also supports leaders to effectively interpret and communicate strategy and to engage the commitment of every organizational member to achieve strategic objectives.

Developing Leadership Presence

Presence is the power to connect and the power to positively impact others. Strategy is nothing if it isn't enthusiastically implemented. The leader's job is much more than being the translator of top-down strategy. It is to communicate a personally relevant and meaningful vision of future success that inspires others to make their best contributions. Coaching supports leaders to gain the clarity about what's really important, to hone the messages that will resonate, and to deliver them with passion and verve.

Developing Talent as a Strategic Asset

In the midst of a decidedly level technical playing field coupled with fierce competition for skilled workers in many industries, the development and allocation of talent assets has become a strategic imperative. This notwithstanding, many leaders today either don't think it's their job to develop people, or they simply don't know how to approach the task. Coaching supports leaders to develop the plans and actions that will develop and align people and skills with mission-critical objectives. With the support of coaching, leaders also learn the all-important skills of delivering effective feedback and coaching for high-impact performance. By being coached themselves, they learn first-hand how the process works, and they can apply their learning in real-time work situations.

Making Strategic Leadership a Continuous Learning Process

In today's fast-paced business environment leaders must make decisions in highly compressed time-frames and in the absence of a comfortable amount of data. Making the shift from a highly analytical approach to decision-making to one that is more intuitive can be challenging for leaders whose prior success was defined in large measure by analytical skills rooted in technical expertise. Working with a skilled coach, a leader can hone the skills and behaviors that foster more effective approaches to time-pressured decisions.

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