

Rethinking Leadership: A Revolutionary Look at the Work of the Senior Leadership Team

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The very weird day of “Kip” van Winkle, senior executive

It took Kip most of breakfast to fully wake up. After all, 50 years asleep is a rather long time, but he didn't know that yet. The last he could remember was tossing and turning in bed after a particularly stressful day at the office – committee meetings, customer problems, cheap imports flooding the market. He recalled taking a couple of sleeping tablets and now felt unusually groggy. Plus, it was always difficult waking up alone – he had never really adjusted to single life after the divorce.

Showered, shaved and dressed, his mind was on the coming business day as he took the subway to work. Looking around, something didn't seem quite right – things looked and felt different, but sleepy commuters were still going to work, just as always, so he thought nothing of it – must still be the lingering after affects of the sleeping tablets. The elevators were the same, so he felt as sense of relief as he crowded in with the others. It was when the doors opened onto the executive floor of ACME Industries that he realized something was terribly wrong! This was definitely not his sleepy old company.

Everywhere people were running about in what seemed like a frantic pace. Was there a disaster or something, he wondered? The staff at ACME never moved this fast, not even when the boss called. And many of them were talking into strange looking miniature devices held up to one ear – and the weird ringing sounds – what happened to the familiar Ma Bell ring tone? He paused at the desk of one of the secretaries and noticed a most bizarre looking typewriter – she typing words onto a miniature television screen, not on paper. And he couldn't see any carbons. He stood and watched as one of the executive assistants stared into her little screen and flipped through what looked like a vast library with just a few key strokes. Access to unlimited information at the touch of a button – what the hell was going on?

Everywhere Kip turned he felt out of place – strange, unable to comprehend the changes that had overcome his workplace – the speed of activity, information access, and instant communications while you move about. Completely disoriented, he moved towards the board room, realizing it was time for the senior staff meeting, his head still buzzing.

He entered just after the meeting had gotten underway. He paused, looked around, listened for a moment, and felt instantly at ease. Everything was the same – at least things hadn't changed at the top!

Ever since the publication of “In Search of Excellence” in 1982 a growing tidal wave of business improvement tools and techniques have helped businesses around the globe become more productive. Such tools and techniques as Reengineering, EVA, Design-to-Manufacture, Six Sigma, Lean, Balanced Scorecard, supply-chain integration, strategic outsourcing and others have reduced costs, improved productivity and helped capture market share. In addition, advances in technology (email, video-conferencing, personal computing, and of course the internet) have dramatically improved the speed and velocity of business. Together these advances have dramatically changed the lives and work practices of nearly every group and function inside a company.

Except one – the senior leadership team. This group, unarguably the most influential in the company, has remained largely outside the focus and pressure on process improvement. Their work practices remain much the same as they were 50 or more years ago (aside from email, video conferencing and other technology related speed enablers – and we now know that speed, without redesigning work processes can lead to reduced efficiency, increased stress and even process breakdown).

Not only are the work practices and processes of the senior team largely unchanged, in most companies they are largely unmapped, undefined and poorly standardized. In addition, the modern senior leadership team is usually seen as immune, by themselves and others, from any business improvement process. Traditionally the senior team and its work has been seen as separate, outside of and removed from the fundamental work processes that go on inside the business.

This article takes exactly the opposite view. The senior leadership team has a dramatic impact on overall company performance in numerous ways, many of which they are not even aware of, and when they chose not to use process improvement tools on their own collective activities, the working of the senior team can actually destroy economic value through redundant, inefficient and time consuming work activities at the top, what is commonly known as **waste**.

For the past 20 years leadership studies have mostly focused on behavioural characteristics, ultimately leading to the current “cult of charisma” and quick fixes now rampant in a plethora of popular business books and in the press. However, in today's difficult global economic environment, organizational efficiency and business effectiveness are again taking center stage. Not since the

controversial article by Abraham Zaleznik on the real work of leadership (1989, *Real Work*, HBR) and the writings of Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith on senior teams (*The Wisdom of Teams*, 1993 and *Teams at the Top*, 1998) have we paused to ask some fundamental questions of those at the top of the business.

- What is the real work of the senior team?
- How do they create value?
- In what ways can they actually destroy value (without knowing it)?
- How can the senior team be more productive and ensure greater business success?
- Is there a better way to organize and lead?

For the past two decades these questions have gone unasked, largely due to the overall robustness of a growing global economy fuelled by easy access to capital. After all, leadership must have been doing its job as evidenced by rising share prices and record bonuses. But today, with a global recession still struggling to recover, companies are facing unprecedented challenges that threaten their very survival. Risk is everywhere, aggregate demand is collapsing, funding at all levels is difficult to impossible to obtain, competition is becoming cut-throat, morale is low and key employees are vulnerable. Executives and senior teams, for the most part, have little experience navigating such perilous waters. However, strategic opportunities abound for those who, instead of automatically defaulting to cost cutting and layoffs, are willing to rethink the work of leadership.

The Work of Leadership Isn't Working

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results"- Albert Einstein

When the dust settles on the recent meltdown of the global financial markets much of the fault will be attributed to poor leadership – especially at the top of large financial institutions where leaders were unable to stem personal and corporate greed, and the fault also lies in regulatory bodies unwilling to impose the requisite oversight and accountability required for the stewardship of billions of dollars of other people's money.

Further evidence for the failure of leadership lies in the fact that with several decades of economic prosperity we have witnessed a steady and dramatic decline in employee engagement and a growing lack of trust in leadership, not just inside companies, but in nearly all our global institutions. Today people see the future, both their own personal future and the economic and political state of the world, with growing pessimism, concern and in many

cases, fear. And when people feel uncertain about their leaders and the future, productivity suffers.

But how can this be? Leadership training and MBA degrees are more popular than ever. Executive leadership courses at major business schools are oversubscribed. Mega leadership conferences like the World Business Forum, billed as a two-day transformational experience for leaders looking to achieve results, draws thousands of executives to hear from seasoned business leaders and academics such as Jack Welch, Jim Collins, Clayton Christensen and others. And books on leadership dominate the list of non-fiction best sellers, many having been translated into dozens of languages. With all this expert advice and teaching available live, in books and on the internet, what's the problem? Are executives showing up but not listening, are they buying the books but not reading them?

And leadership training courses abound, whether they are workshop based, offered over the internet in digital form, taught in executive MBA schools, or are part of the growing number of offerings by Human Resource departments inside corporations. And the hallways of modern organizations are clogged with coaches whose job is to improve leadership at all levels of the organization. Yet this growing activity is not producing the required results. Leadership is failing business and the world. What's going on?

The answer lies in the fact that we have been looking at leadership from the wrong end of the telescope and it's been difficult to gain a proper perspective. A vast majority of business books and academic studies in the field of leadership have focused on behaviour – behaviour styles, communication styles, leadership behaviours, dealing with difficult people, team dynamics, advice from the "masters", and a plethora of other behaviour-based approaches. Of course poor or inappropriate behaviour in our leaders creates both business and people problems, but is it just the leadership behaviours that need to change?

Teambuilding is a good example. After a 3-day senior teambuilding workshop the improvements in alignment, trust, openness, interpersonal communications and personal change are often spectacular. And the resulting display of renewal, optimism, openness and trust among the senior team usually brings significant improvements in the overall ability to get things done across the company, focus more clearly on business requirements, deal more effectively with people and holds the promise of a more healthy corporate culture.

However, over varying periods of time, often measured in months or one or two quarters at the most, as the "glow" and healthy attitudes tend to fade, old non-productive

behaviour patterns re-emerge and a creeping cynicism sets in. And once a team building or culture change program has failed, it's nearly impossible to try it again – people just aren't up for another short term spike followed by disappointment. Plus, after talking with hundreds of senior executives in leadership positions we find that executives are tired of the same old behavioural approaches – everywhere they turn the books, articles, editorials, blogs, training courses are all pushing the same thing – leadership is failing and leaders need to change their behaviour! Is it all a leadership behaviour problem? Is there something else we've been missing in our efforts to improve leadership and business performance?

In those rare exceptions where a strong and committed CEO has taken the challenge of behavioural change to heart and leads "from the front" with demonstrable new behaviours while holding those on the senior team personally accountable, the change in culture has been significantly longer lasting. And consultants and business academics have used these "exceptional" leaders as justification for the belief that strong leadership behaviors are the solution to overall business improvement.

My growing dissatisfaction with the ephemeral nature of behavioural approaches has recently led me on a quest of a different sort – away from business psychology, coaching and leadership training and towards the more tangible, seemingly mundane, less flashy factors associated with organizational performance – I call them **leadership work processes**.

It is my observation that the strongest factors influencing culture, behaviour and business performance are the processes that govern work at the top of organizations – a sampling of which includes senior staff meetings, the annual budgeting cycle, the strategic planning process, monthly and quarterly operations reviews, administrative and human resource procedures, capital allocation processes and a host of other business processes driven by the senior team. And in the majority of companies these are not the standardized, replicable, efficient "lean" processes that drive consistent business results and demand consistent behaviors to operate and maintain, but a collection of very loose, undefined and in most cases undocumented set of activities.

And if the leadership work processes are not effective, this inefficiency has a magnifying or leverage affect onto the next layers of management and on down into the organization – a phenomenon previously coined as the "*shadow of the leaders*" (Childress and Senn, 1995). While this concept was originally meant to describe how poor leadership behaviours among the senior team (interdepartmental conflict, poor communications, lack of trust, hidden agenda, etc.) is mirrored and magnified down into the organization, I now realize that leadership work processes, driven by the senior team, can have the same

and an even greater negative multiplier effect on the activities and effectiveness of each successive organizational layer.

There is ample evidence that middle management are frustrated by the inefficiencies of many leadership processes that cause them unnecessary work, excessive time in meetings and additional rework. We now understand that inefficient leadership work processes also inject enormous amounts of waste (time, money, human effort, loss of goodwill) into the organization resulting in slower than adequate strategic and tactical business decisions, lack of ability to follow through or implement new initiatives, cost overruns in important and complex customer delivery programs, low morale and poor employee engagement and commitment.

After observing and studying the transformative impact of lean principles, six sigma methodologies and value chain analysis on performance in manufacturing, supply chain and other business functions, it suddenly became obvious – if we were to look at the **senior leadership team as a system with a defined set of work processes** this may open up more effective approaches to improve leadership at the top and organization performance in general.

When we began looking at senior leadership teams from this different perspective, something immediately jumped out at us, **the leadership team stands apart from the business processes!** They aren't integrated into the business activities they initiate! They are outside the performance improvement game, yet are at the head of the overall corporate value chain!

Normal performance improvement programs that have had a great impact on streamlining the efficiency and effectiveness of the work of middle management and certain business functions (lean principles, business reengineering, process redesign, supply chain rationalizations, etc.) have not been applied to the senior team. They are outside the system, not really in the game, aloof from scrutiny and attempts at fundamental improvement and redesign! Either by oversight or intention, they have been left out (or opted out). The consequence of leadership "disengagement" has enormous implications for business effectiveness and organization performance.

If all this sounds vaguely like reengineering revisited, you might be right, but I believe it is much more fundamental than just reengineering. The fact is, even though everyone acknowledges that change in the world is only going to accelerate, senior teams have neglected to rethink and change their leadership processes accordingly. And employees, customers and shareholders are paying for it today!

What is the work of the senior team?

"The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary." - Donald Kendall, former CEO, Pepsi Co.

In numerous team alignment, strategy and performance improvement workshops over the past two decades we have asked a simple question: *What is the work of the senior executive team?* The answer very much depends on the audience in the room.

If the audience is the senior team themselves, the answers come back quickly and with a slight indignation in their voices: develop strategy, control risks, determine budgets, allocate capital to worthy projects, manage talent, maximize profits ... and the list goes on and on. We're accountable for everything! It seems like this group does a huge amount and is no doubt critical to the success of the organization. And when asked where most of this work takes place, a single answer is predominant – in meetings! Then it tends to dawn on the group – if most of our work is conducted in meetings, and we all know meetings are full of wasted time, then how effective is our work? As you can imagine, the next several hours in the seminar room are taken up by reflection, lively debate and in many cases, useful insights.

However, if the audience is a group of middle managers or direct reports to the senior team, the answers to that same question, *What is the work of the senior executive team?* tend to be very different.

First there is characteristically a long pause... you can literally hear the cogs and wheels turning round – a few even snicker under their breath. Then people begin to nervously look around the room, almost urging someone to go first; to throw out the first salvo. It's not infrequent that the silence is broken when someone at the back of the room pipes up: "Hell if I know!"

It's not that the middle managers don't like or respect the senior team as individuals (although that is the case in some companies), it's more that they are confused by the lack of standardization, documentation and inconsistency of the senior team work processes. As an example, it's not uncommon for direct reports and second level managers to lament that a great deal of their time is taken up chasing data suddenly requested by the senior team. And once the data goes upstairs, "it's the last we ever hear of it!"

During our workshop discussions on business improvement and organization effectiveness the topic of reorganizations frequently comes up and the frustration seems to be the same in company after company. In the words of one very concerned second level executive. *"When my company experiences performance or delivery problems, instead of looking for root causes and doing a*

thorough performance and process analysis, the senior team decides to reorganize! New boxes, a couple of new faces, different reporting lines; but the organization still underperforms."

Here we see a clear example of the erroneous belief that business issues can be solved by getting someone with better leadership (skills and/or behaviors) to own the problem, ignoring the possibility that it might not be a personal leadership defect at all, but rather the result of an ineffective business processes at the top.

Leadership Processes

"First we shape out institutions, and then they shape us."
~Winston Churchill

What do we mean by **leadership process**? Let's start with the generally accepted definition of a business or work process. **Business Process:** *an organized group of related activities that together create customer value. The focus in a process is not on individual units of work, but rather on an entire group of activities that, when effectively brought together, create a result that customers value* (Hammer, 1990).

Similarly, we are defining a **Leadership Process** as: *an organized group of related activities initiated by the senior team and under their direct guidance that together enhances the ability of managers and employees to deliver value to their immediate customer.*

The key differentiator of a leadership process is that it is initiated and under the guidance of the senior team, and in this case the "immediate customer" is management and employees, not the end customer. Leadership Processes are internal activities focusing more on organizational and management effectiveness than on the end customer. Thus, the real customer of the senior team is their direct reports, a notion that has heretofore only been understood and accepted by a few "enlightened" senior teams.

When defined this way a few of the key leadership processes become immediately obvious;

- the annual budgeting and periodic review process,
- the (quarterly or monthly) operations review process,
- the annual strategic planning process,
- senior team staff meetings,
- the executive talent development process,
- the employee performance review process,
- and senior staff meetings,

to name a few. In many ways, these are the work packages of the senior team.

When we ask to see process maps or value stream maps of these processes, few companies can produce them!

If leadership process maps do exist, they are not written down to anywhere near the detail and precision as a manufacturing or procurement process. In fact, in most cases leadership processes reside in the collective knowledge of the company and usually the senior executive most closely associated with the issue. For example, the CFO tends to be the owner of the annual budgeting process; the COO owns the Operations Review process, etc.

In the words of one senior executive: *"Most of our leadership processes actually work more on tribal knowledge than well designed or documented process steps. And its hell for a new senior team member – to survive the first year they must rely heavily on their long serving direct reports and other team members who know how things are done. As the old saying goes – the natives have the maps!"*

In several cases we have gone into an organization and helped map out one or more of the leadership processes, (much like an "as is" process map at the beginning of a lean transformation on the manufacturing floor) looking for overall flow, time spent at each activity, overall process efficiency and waste. And we have been surprised by what we have found.

First we notice that leadership processes tend to be a patchwork of fixes and changes added on to a legacy process as a way of "making it work better". And when the overall time consumed is compared to the actual value-add time, the amount of waste in time, money and human energy is shocking. One senior executive describes it this way:

"Our budget process is mostly an historical exercise. We take the past 5 years of budget numbers, plug in a growth estimate for each business unit, roll up the figures, then haggle over what we can and can't afford in order to arrive at the three big numbers corporate wants from us in the first place. As a result we spend more time during the year cutting costs and moving allocations around than actually focusing our energies on growing the business in a strategic direction. The waste of time and effort is criminal."

Without standardized, effective and best in class leadership processes, every time a new CEO or leader comes into a company, he (she) tends to change things to fit their style or personal way of doing things. Changes in how strategy is developed, how meetings and operations reviews are conducted, how the senior team is structured, and also personnel changes tend to have a negative impact on the momentum of a company. In the words of one

second level executive: *"It's as if everything going on before was wrong and the new way is the right way, except it's never the silver bullet fix intended."*

Unfortunately, after two or three successive leadership changes at the top, cynicism tends to invade the ranks of middle management. In one company, after having five CEOs over a 12 year period, a group of disenfranchised middle managers began calling themselves the *"We Be's"* - *we be here before you and we be here after you!* Needless to say their collective resistance to change had a considerable blocking affect on changes and suggested improvements from above.

When new leaders bring in new ways of doing things because "that's the way we did it at my previous company" or "it's the way I like to manage", without establishing well documented and designed leadership processes, they run the risk of creating greater disenfranchisement among the very employees whose job it is to help improve the company.

Contrast these ad-hoc leadership practices with the standardized leadership processes at work in the military, often referred to as "Mission Command". Here, adherence to standard processes for Planning, Briefing, Executing, and Debriefing can mean the difference between life and death on the battlefield. If a commander is replaced in the midst of the engagement, there is no time for a "new way of doing things".

From the General to the platoon sergeant, everyone knows the standard processes, how they work and how they are to be implemented. In the majority of cases, the process carries the day, not the whims or favourite approaches of the leader. Built into these standard processes however is the flexibility to respond to unforeseen events with a change process that is also well understood at all levels.

A few decades ago one of the key leadership processes of the senior team was training and developing the next level of management. Today, like many other processes, this important task has been mostly outsourced, to the human resources function and to executive education courses at prominent business schools. In the current economic climate where the rules in play for the past two decades have suddenly been replaced with uncertainty at every turn and many up and coming managers have never had to face such dire business conditions, the job of executive development is critically important for senior management to bring back under their control. However, today, young leaders (General Managers and the like) are not being properly coached by senior leaders. Why? Culprits seem to be the fast pace of business, changed moral imperatives and an ever increasing senior team focus on external issues rather than internal. How should this coaching

work? This is not about mentoring. This is about real-time coaching and training.

For example, in one company the board and senior leaders saw (and sensed) the economic slow down coming, mostly because they have access to experts and outside intelligence that their GMs do not. Knowing it was impossible for them to deal with a mega-downturn through policy alone, they quickly scheduled a 2 day GM coaching session, held at corporate headquarters, where the senior leaders talked to the GMs about the current and expected future state. They shared historic best practices and failure modes of businesses who in past similar situations had responded properly as well as improperly during economic crisis.

Some of the business cases studied showed how certain companies increased investment in key areas, cut COGS, worked margins, and incentivized their best talent. Others cut G&A, stopped investing, and quickly lost their best people. The discussion that followed was both pointed, challenging and invigorating. Needless to say that company exhibits an entirely different level of positive energy and feelings of being in control of their destiny than many other companies facing a severe downturn.

Where are the case studies that GMs and young leaders can read and debate with their senior leaders? And if these case studies exist, where is the willingness of the senior team to enter into such open debates? We see leadership development as just one of the many leadership processes that, if properly designed, can yield significant business rewards.

Quality Thinking: The other work of leadership

“No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking.” ~Voltaire

We have only to look at the hassled faces of today’s senior executives and scan their daily calendars to realize the majority of their time is spent in meetings. Meetings often start early in the morning and end late in the evening, with executives running from one to the next, barely having time for a toilet break. Its not that meetings are inappropriate places to conduct executive level business, in fact well-conducted meetings can accomplish a lot. Our concern is that too often meetings are not used for arriving at decisions, collective debate or alignment, but are hijacked by poor and ineffective leadership processes.

A 2004 article in the Harvard Business Review by Michael C. Mankins entitled **Stop Wasting Valuable Time** (HBR, Sept. 2004) cites some startling statistics about the use of

time among the senior executive team. Analysing the meeting diaries of senior team members from 187 companies worldwide (with market capitalizations of at least \$1 Billion), the authors state: *“in the typical company, senior executives spend less than three days each month working together as a team – and in that time they devote less than three hours to strategic issues.”*

What hijacks the majority of the time senior executives spend together in meetings? According to Mankins, valuable time is wasted by unstructured processes that address business critical issues in an undisciplined manner. While he introduces examples of seven techniques that can bring some discipline, consistency and effective decision making into senior executive meetings, he stops short of looking at the entire senior team as a system and examining their leadership processes in a robust way.

When processes are ad hoc and undocumented, valuable executive team time is taken up either with explanations or debates on issues which, if the leadership processes were effectively designed, documented and adhered to, would never make it on the agenda. More time would then be available for quality discussion, quality thinking and decision making.

In an HBR article entitled *Real Work*, published in 1989, Abraham Zaleznik writes: *“Whatever else the real work of leadership involves – and it is constantly changing – it always involves one crucial component. That component is thinking.”*

I believe that better designed leadership processes at the top will actually free up senior management for more quality thinking time – alone and together – in their important role as stewards of the company.

If we can improve the amount of thinking time senior leaders have, we can also reduce their dependence on outside consultants – after all, who knows more about the company, its strengths, the culture, its customers and the overall business than the senior team? Being able to spend more quality time talking together about their business and also have more time for individual thinking can have an enormous impact on the success of the enterprise. Efficient and well designed leadership processes can release available time for quality thought and debate about real business issues.

How we got here in the first place

“Charisma is the result of effective leadership, not the other way around.” ~ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus

Why is the senior team outside the corporate value chain? By all reason and logic they should be actively involved in

any and all activities that could increase corporate value. Part of the answer lies in the hierarchical model of organization structure advocated by large corporations in the post-war years to manage growth and complexity and in the common belief that senior leaders are different from the rest of the organization and therefore must stand apart.

But there seem to be at least two other significant contributing factors to lack of leadership engagement; first, engaged leadership is very hard work and with all the other time demands on executives, real leadership engagement can easily lose out. Second is the modern day obsession we have with the leader as celebrity and the cult of “executive stardom”.

One of the major by-products of the focus on charisma and exceptional personality as a major determinant of leadership is that people allow and even expect their leaders to be slightly removed from the “work of the organization” and respond to ideas from their leaders as infallible pronouncements. In companies where the cult of leadership is strong, few people, even senior executives, speak up or challenge ideas that come from above.

As a result for several decades we have been working in an era of “superstar leadership” and “charismatic unaccountability” where position, title, obscene compensation and attendance at Davos have been substituted for engaged and effective leadership. The results are beginning to show.

In his classic research on major corporate disasters and the leaders responsible for them, Sydney Finkelstein (*Why Smart Executives Fail, 2003*) cites the “superstar syndrome” and “ineffective leadership practices” as being at the heart of many spectacular corporate failures.

By focusing too much on the CEO, or other superstar executives as the hero “with all the answers”, robust leadership processes that can surface valuable information and engage all the members of the leadership team in candid debate tend to take a back seat. Thus the individual superstar who helped orchestrate a spectacular business success several years ago can just as easily lead the company into irrecoverable disaster. This culture of worshipping charismatic leaders tends to over inflate the importance of the individual at the expense of full engagement by the senior team and masks the critical importance of leadership processes on business success.

Where we go from here

“If everyone is thinking alike, then someone isn’t thinking!”
~General George Patton

The purpose of this article is two-fold. The first is to create more effective leadership (and hopefully more effective leaders) by putting the spotlight on the importance of leadership processes, while at the same time shifting it away from the single focus on behaviour change as the solution to today’s business problems.

The second is to reopen the debate on leadership. Too long issues of leadership, whether at the individual, corporate, agency, national, international or global level have been clouded in an excessive focus on personality and behaviours and not nearly enough attention has been paid to the actual “work of leadership”.

Our recommendation is that if any of the thoughts or ideas presented here strike a resonant chord, the first thing a senior team should do is build a value chain map of several of their most important senior team processes. If you don’t know which ones to pick, ask middle management – if they are truly the “first customer of the senior team” then they will be able to inform you as to which senior team processes are the least effective and efficient. Then go about mapping these processes.

If you don’t have internal lean or six sigma expertise inside the company, seek assistance. Such maps can be completed in very short order and the emerging picture of the process steps and the exposed waste in time, effort and costs should convince you of the value of developing more robust and standardized leadership processes. It’s time to get reengaged in the work of leadership and we believe the performance benefits are sizeable.

*I am a leader, therefore I lead;
I am an executive, therefore I execute;
I am a human being, therefore I care.*

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