

The Difficulties of Clouds and Leadership

Anyone who's traveled for business can relate to the dreaded thought... "delayed – *again*". And so was my fate on that dreary late afternoon in January, waiting to fly out of Indianapolis to work with a client. No sense of purpose existed among the depressed travelers except to file along and do as we were told in hopes that our needs might ultimately be met. My flight finally boarded and with fingers crossed we proceeded to the takeoff queue. After some time and, well, some *more* time, we were finally on our way as the sun began its descent over the western Indiana plains. Not that you'd have known it was sunset of course. Not a single ray of sunlight was able to penetrate the cloud ceiling that hung over the region and a cold, light rain fell as though to punctuate the gloom. As the Embraer EMB170 ascended from the runway into the breezy atmosphere, the already long day seemed as though it would have no end...just eternal grey.

I looked out my window to see that we were strategically making our way to the cloud ceiling. I wasn't sure where the opening was (because I couldn't see any openings at all), but my trust in the pilots prevailed and I waited to see how things turned out. Upon entering the clouds, any notion of visibility, direction, and orientation disappeared. We were introduced to a world of swirling, ever-changing air currents and unanticipated change. The plane lurched about as it intermittently hit each pocket of turbulent air. It occurred to me at that point the amount of faith we had instilled in the systems and processes around us. The pilots were most certainly flying physically blind; only the technology in the cockpit and the crew's interpretation of the same was ensuring that we stayed in the right direction and didn't stray in a manner that could prove fatal. To say that this portion of the flight was unpleasant would be an understatement.

After several endless minutes in the billowing chaos and blindness, we finally and gratefully broke out into the open. Climbing into the upper regions of the troposphere, a new world exposed itself to our consciousness. As we gained a strategic vantage point above the cloudbanks that just moments before had seemed so menacing, their appearance changed in an inconceivably dramatic fashion. Having been blind and insecure I now had the perspective I imagine held by a conquering arctic explorer. As the sun gracefully rescinded over the horizon, its pink-orange hues cascaded over the clouds as though they were windswept dunes of snow and ice looked upon from a frozen ridge at the top of the world. Everything now made sense; we knew why we climbed through the tumble of confusion and understood which direction was necessary to reach our destination. Nobody could ever imagine the tumult and perceived pointlessness prevailing in the reaches below.

The same strata of perception and experience exist in organizations without us ever really acknowledging or dealing with the impact it has on people and business results. Individual contributors feel hopeless in their attempts to execute a strategy that seems to be forever changing and never fulfilling. Line and middle managers are in a constant state of emotional whiplash as they are pressured from every direction to "do better"

with little aid in how to make it happen. Executive leadership has the vision and understands the meaning of it all but is too often out of touch with the realities of those trying to make their vision reality. Those in each strata of the organization have their own distinctly legitimate experiences, concerns, and perceptions. None of these are of any ultimate benefit when they are not communicated, respected, and addressed. The good news is that we aren't doomed to this fate of misalignment. Lessons can be learned and actions taken to ensure we all engage in the empathy necessary to succeed.

For those in the midst of the gloom – Sometimes life at the staff level can be extremely trying. We often feel like the weary travelers just doing what we're told, hoping that our actions somehow will make a difference. The first step is acknowledging the degree of frustration, resistance, and even despair that may exist among you and your rank and file colleagues. Nothing will ever improve if you adopt an approach rooted in denial of the problem. That's not to say you should go verbally abuse the nearest manager; you may guess (and correctly so) that such action will only make things worse. Imagine my traveling cohorts who approached an airline gate attendant, banged their fist on the counter, and noisily insisted that the attendant "make it better". You've no doubt observed that the travelers who engage in this strategy almost invariably fail. Those who respectfully make their case and offer to be part of the solution are much more likely to get their needs met. So when approaching management about an issue, remember:

- Stop to think about what really is the true root cause of the issue.
- Identify whether you're just venting or really seeking a remedy to the situation.
- Line managers sometimes have much less direct control than you might guess.
- Be ready to acknowledge any part (positive or negative) you've played.
- Come with more than complaints; come with possible solutions.
- Think about the business case for change; managers get paid to take care of the business.
- Anticipate positive follow-ups to negative responses; plan for "Plan B".

For those caught in the turbulence – Being a member of line or middle management can be one of the loneliest positions on the planet. The difficulty is that while the flight in the story just flew through the turbulence along its way, line and middle managers seem to get stuck *living* in the troubling swirl of uncertainty day in and day out. All the while, staff complains about how terrible things are and upper management demands ever more outcomes with ever fewer resources. There is constant pressure from all directions to deliver more in ways that sometimes seem to contradict each other. And like the passengers on the plane, middle managers have to trust that the systems and processes will guide the company safely through it all. There is little guidance to explicitly show them which way to go, making decision-making exponentially more difficult and second-guessing easy to do. Middle managers can't count on anyone but themselves to improve the situation. They must remember that they are the vital translators of the organization. How these managers represent vision and direction to the line associates is essential to the effective execution of strategy. Similarly, how they

represent performance barriers to senior leadership is often the key to sponsorship and implementation of solutions. In surviving the pressures of life in the mists, line and middle managers should:

- Genuinely hear staff out; their frustration is very human and very normal.
- Be as transparent as possible when conveying leadership's vision and reasoning.
- Advocate for staff just like you do the business; supporting them is part of your role.
- Be realistic in conveying messages to senior leadership; don't sugarcoat messages or catastrophise them either, just call it as you see it.
- Know well which systems and processes work well and which don't.
- Network with peers to ensure that a united message is provided to all staff.
- Encourage consistent use of the effective systems and processes; the navigation equipment doesn't do any good if you don't use it properly.

For those looking at the sunset – Ask most senior leaders, be they business owners or seasoned Fortune 500 executives, and you will learn that life “at the top” isn't nearly as glamorous or easy as most believe it to be. The one thing that can't be argued, however, is that those at senior positions have power and authority beyond anyone else in terms of initiating, sponsoring, and assuring change. It's also true that nobody else in an organization has the benefit of seeing all of the pieces and how they fit together on a daily basis. When looking at the organizational strategies, you can become very enamored with the grandness of it all. It's easy to forget that none of it means anything without your consistent visibility and interaction with those executing the plan. Like looking down on those clouds, it's sometimes difficult to envision the hardships below when everything at eye level makes so much sense. In order to stay connected to those in the clouds and on the ground, senior leaders need to remember to:

- Sponsor a culture that encourages open, pro-active communication of ideas and issues.
- Expect the kind of behavior that they themselves model for others in the organization.
- Make time to regularly stay in first-hand touch with those at all levels of the organization.
- Encourage questions from those middle managers responsible for translating the vision.
- Listen constantly without judgment or pre-emptive response.
- Encourage thoughtful risk-taking at all levels and genuinely celebrate learning from failure.
- Systematically ensure that a singular communication of the vision is delivered throughout the organization by senior, middle, and line management.

An organization cannot afford for anyone to forget the struggles and realities of life at *all* levels...on the ground, in the turbulence, and above the clouds. When senior leaders forget about the rain at ground level, they fall out of touch with reality and are incapable of making the adjustments necessary to keep strategy on track. When the rank-and-file

forgets (or sometimes never even learns) that there is a beautiful sunset to behold, personal connection to the mission and direction of the organization withers and performance falters. When middle managers feel isolated and unguided, the backbone their leadership provides collapses and the entire system fails. Noting the title's reference to "leadership," it's essential for those at all levels to demonstrate the respective leadership necessary to model behaviors that keep communications open and vision alive. Remember that there's always a sunset somewhere and that everyone has a need to see it.

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