

## Finding the Path

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***“You do not navigate a company to a predefined destination. You take steps, one at a time, into an unknowable future. There are no paths, no roads ahead of us. In the final analysis, it is the walking that beats the path. It is not the path that makes the walk.”***

*The Living Company, by Arie De Geus*

Trendy strategies and time-worn techniques of leadership don't have a lot of credibility in a world that is changing at exponential rates. Ten years ago, social media wasn't a factor in our daily lives, fifteen years ago, you had to look hard and long to find an executive with a laptop on his (yes, his) shoulder or a cell phone in his pocket. They had little people to take care of these things for them.

You can't live or lead like you lived or led in the past because the future is unclear when you don't know the factors that will determine how you and everyone else functions. As we have floundered in the frenetic race to produce more, faster, cheaper, we have become lost in a maze of minutia that leaves insignificant amounts of time to think, much less innovate. We reward time in place doing a mediocre job rather than expect or even demand creative ideas. Calculated risk taking is often deemed too frivolous or wasteful for productivity metrics, though it may well result in discovering the next great focus of all our lives.

Leadership is not an individual sport. You cannot lead without having followers and, in today's workplace, people make choices far greater than what will gain them a corner office with a nameplate on their desk. It's hard to establish trust, much less credibility when your front door is revolving. If 3.7 years sounds like a short time to be on a job, try being an executive. Their average is 2.7 years and counting. Most determine their longevity in the first 90 days as they seek to make their mark and, instead, place a

“...too many enterprises seem self-destructively locked into a debilitating reality of 100 percent perspiration and zero percent inspiration. A healthier alternative is the Orbit of trust that allows time—without immediate, concrete evidence of productivity—for the miracle of creativity to occur.”

*Orbiting the Giant Hairball,*  
Gordon MacKenzie

target on their foreheads by creating more chaos than progress. It's great to know all the answers; even better to understand the questions.

Engage people in outcomes rather than compelling them to fit into nice little boxes called "job descriptions." This will ensure focus on how and why they fit into the big picture rather than on isolated tasks. Matrix organizations sound terrific, if a little Pollyanna-ish. We will all play nicely in the sandbox, sing Kum Ba Yah, and never be nasty to each other, because we care so deeply about the common good. Better than silos where we ignore each other, but not much more effective. Let's face it, the American culture is not based on group identity. A healthy, forward looking company will realize the self-interest of the organization is based on the individual's perspective of what is worth doing and for what benefit/cost.

How can you be a successful leader in the next ten years? My crystal ball says it depends on just five things good leaders instinctively know:

1. Leadership is where you find it, which may not match a title. Go with what you've got and enjoy the rewards of natural, instinctive leadership that gets things done.
2. Leaders are human. They rarely live in ivory towers and it is even rarer that they think quotable, profound thoughts. They succeed; they fail; they risk. The most powerful thing they can do is say, "I don't know," more frequently, and then engage other people in finding the answers. Don't forget to listen.
3. Leaders build strategic alliances. They know a competitor today may be a partner or advocate tomorrow. Learn from each other. The boat that rises takes everyone with it. An economy neither fails or succeeds because of your company, your industry, or your personal brilliance. It takes all of us rowing the same direction.
4. Leaders don't have to be popular; few are. Successful leaders are always respected, however. You can gain or lose trust but once you lose it, you will never regain it and the message spreads around very, very fast, making H1N1 look anemic.
5. Leaders are quick to observe, fast on the uptake, ready to change and agile in finding alternatives that move the organization forward rather than maintaining the status quo. They don't carry baggage, their own or others, and they don't leave dead bodies around. History and tradition make great annual banquets but have minimal use in looking for opportunities for the future.

It's just as simple as that.

