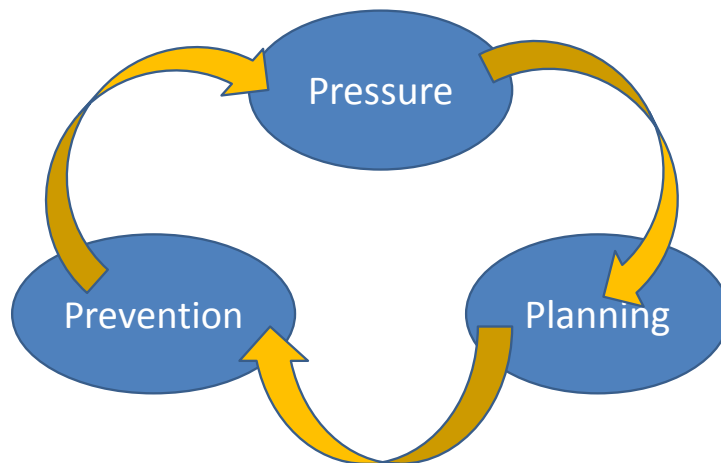


Leadership Cycle: Pressure – Planning – Prevention

There's a cycle for you to consider as a leader responsible to your organisation for the capable and considerate care of your customers in a cost-effective way. Many things can weaken and/or break this cycle and prevent you from focusing on your vision.



Pressure

Although there are many things that put pressure on you as you pursue your organisational objectives, four stand out.

1. Awareness
2. Priorities
3. Value
4. Decisions

Awareness is an unrecognised and undervalued sensitivity that true leaders are born with. To be aware is to be gifted with “special filters” that allow you to be acquainted with or mindful of something or someone. If you have “leadership-awareness”, you also have a keen consciousness of what matters and is particularly relevant and/or topical to your vision and goals; and ultimately to your staff, customers and stockholders/business peers.

Leaders have intuition that serves them as they survey immediate and distant areas of influence and achievement, analyse what they see and select insights; making obvious, common sense and precision connections. These connections are then prioritised based on value-before-cost to create the foundation for knowledgeable and wise decisions.

Establishing sensible priorities, however, is a learned skill based on experience, awareness and hindsight. What's unique with leaders is they don't just keep going forward relentlessly (a trait of managers), but stop frequently to identify constraints and victories as building blocks to a long-term future plan. They know how to use these building blocks to pave the way for succeeding through others.

Planning

You don't hear much talk about goal setting nowadays...perhaps it was a fad of the "success-motivation" industry, yet goal setting is an unmistakable distinctive characteristic of true leaders. As a leader you've embraced the story of Alice (in Wonderland) meeting the Cheshire Cat conversation:

Alice: *Oh, no, no. I was just wondering if you could help me find my way.*

Cheshire Cat: *Well that depends on where you want to get to.*

Alice: *Oh, it really doesn't matter, as long as...*

Cheshire Cat: *Then it really doesn't matter which way you go."*

You're the one who sets the destination (not the pathway), explaining the parameters and constraints to reach the destination. This comes from your ability to assess the current "pressure" (see above) and assess the most appropriate-for-the situation milestones, motivation and measurement to reach the goal.

The skills of planning include realistic resource expectations, time management, delegation, analysis, lifetime habits and a keen eye for harmony. Finally, planning includes a determination to assess "progress against plan" and the courage to make adjustments when/if necessary, as well as the courage to say "Stop" or "Go" when necessary.

Prevention

What slips through the cracks all too often is you. Your first priority as a leader, is not the organisation you work for, not to your staff or the customers - it's your personal development, preparation and health. Only in this way, when the whole world around you is in chaos, can you withstand the challenges from a standpoint of strength, confidence and robustness.

Awareness in this instance, of internal health and pressures, is a critical tool. The personal resources you bring to bear on the situation around you that affect, not just you, but those who support you and engage with your customers -- must be monitored, measured and managed.

Another innate quality of a leader is to focus on themselves as a critical way to stay balanced. Physical, functional symptoms -- that the body is fatigued or unwell -- are easily recognised and addressed through sensible eating, exercise, rest and consulting health care professional when necessary and taking their advice.

What's far more difficult to recognise is the build-up of stress. Stress in its simplest definition is response to pressure, stimulation or change. The role of a

leader is one of unmatched stressors. Stress is a normal coping and survival mechanism that helps us adjust swiftly and effectively with what might be a life-threatening challenge. The more we experience negative stressors, the duller we grow to the cumulative effectives. Although, to survive we need stress in our lives, what we typically fail to develop is habitual, automatic coping mechanisms to respond to negative stress. Hugh Mackay addressed this issue in his book “Turning Point”:

“the Last Straw syndrome, [is] a condition in which so much stress and anxiety is being experienced that even quite minor upsets can feel like one thing too many...People who are suffering from the Last Straw syndrome are often puzzled by their own outbreak of anger, often feel that the descent into a pit of despair was not really justified by the event which precipitated it; often find themselves resolving that they are going to get their lives back under control before they do something drastic or foolish in response to one of those ‘last straws.’”

Personal Insight

As I began to climb the corporate ladder, I was fortunate enough to identify and secure a seasoned mentor who still “tells me like it is” today. Fred has a Texas twang and a wisdom that can’t be fathomed. Once, after a long meeting and debrief with him, I naively expressed how I hoped to achieve his level of success as he made it look so much easier than what I was finding in my business day.

He smiled at me and said, *“The higher you go, the harder it becomes. It just looks easier.”* Of course I didn’t believe him except in a theoretical sense. Yet as I began to be trusted for my decisiveness, intuition and courage in business dealings, and rose to embrace more responsibilities, I discovered the hard truth.

The other part of his advice was to put me first, to stay healthy so I could stay alert and aware and be able to plan for contingencies that were inevitable, changes that would be constant and unexpected pressures to compromise and take the easy way out.

As we conclude 2011, I encourage you to consider Fred’s words. Look first to yourself - be aware. Plan for yourself as your key priority. Be prepared to take decisive action to keep your “tank full”, so you can lead well and insightfully. A simple cycle for leaders.

For the December article, I have some important thoughts on New Year’s resolutions that should prove challenging and valuable.