THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Business
Beware these management myths; Managers tend to believe too many leadership lies

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948 words
3 November 2018
The Globe and Mail (Breaking News)
GMBN
English

When it comes to management, B is for balderdash. Unfortunately, we embrace too much of it.

Let's start with goals, which are, after all, where everything is supposed to start. We are expected to have goals for our organization as well as personal goals. Preferably BHAGs – big, hairy, audacious goals – as first promulgated by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in Built to Last.

I have bought in, intellectually. But I am goal-less myself and have been for most of my life. No New Year's resolutions or small non-hairy goals for the year. I ride the currents, doing my best. But I have lacked the courage to admit my goal deficiency.

Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson, founders of the Basecamp software company, are bolder. "Our goal: No goal," they write in their latest book, It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy at Work. No sales goals, no retention goals, no specific profitability goals other than to be profitable.

They tried a revenue target once and then wondered why they were supposed to care about a number they made up. They also worried about whether chasing that number compromised their culture. Instead, they constantly work to make things better.

"Chasing goals often leads companies to compromise their morals, honesty and integrity to reach those fake numbers," they say. "How about something really audacious: No targets, no goals."

I still find it useful at the turn of the year to contemplate the past and future. But that's more meditative, assuming that thinking about it will unconsciously influence me. But why set a goal that, like most New Year's resolutions, will be forgotten two weeks later? Every six weeks or so, the folks at Basecamp decide what they'll be working on next. They say when you embrace such short-term planning you can change your mind often, and that's helpful.

Now let's turn to incentives, which also don't work – or certainly not as promised. The influence of B.F. Skinner and Pavlov, as well as what academic John Rapley in his new book The Twilight of the Money Gods calls the religion of economics, leads us to believe that the carrot of money can accomplish almost anything. When it doesn't, we blame the individuals who don't respond, not our flawed mindset.

And it would seem that when incentives work, it can be with people whose morality, in their grab for money, leaves something to be desired. Witness the financial crisis of 2008 or the creation of fake accounts at Wells Fargo to hit sales targets.

There are many studies questioning the supposed power of incentives and bonuses. The latest I've seen deals with innovation. The researchers found employees under fixed-pay contracts are more likely to pursue innovation ideas that are valuable to the firm compared to employees under variable-pay contracts. https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=54910 Moreover, such efforts are concentrated on innovation ideas that are not specific to the standard task performed by the proposing employee but are applicable to issues of greater breadth for the firm or with a long-term view.

Consultant Liz Ryan, in Forbes, listed 10 leadership lies that managers believe. Here are some:

* If you can't measure something, you can't manage it: In fact, the things that matter most, such as trust levels, aren't all that measurable.

* If you have to assert your authority to keep employees in line, do it: But if you do, she says you have lost the important war between fear and trust.

* Faster is always better: In fact, big decisions and big changes take time.

* Good leaders are tough but fair: She says "a confident leader doesn't need to be tough. They don't need to be strict. What is there to be strict about, after all? You employ adults, not children."

* Good leaders hire slowly and fire fast: The reality is that hiring slowly just turns off people caught in your quicksand. Instead of firing somebody fast, figure out how to use that person more effectively, given your investment in bringing them on board.

One more bit of balderdash for today: Efficiency should be a manager's prime goal.

McGill University Professor Henry Mintzberg says efficiency is not always good, and will ask when was the last time you went to McDonald's – a superbly efficient restaurant – seeking a superb meal? "Beware of efficiency, and of efficiency experts, as well as efficient education, health care and music, even efficient factories," he writes on his website. More generally, beware of balderdash disguised as management truths.

Cannonballs

* Consultant Terry St. Marie says that if you want your team to remember something you must say it at least 15 times .

* Slow hiring processes can lead to losing top candidates, who get snapped up elsewhere. Recruiting expert John Sullivan warns against stretching out interviews over weeks because managers are too busy. Require managers to be available on "interview Fridays" and make it standard practice to hold all candidate interviews that day or evening.

* Nokia chairman Risto Siilasmaa in his new book Transforming Nokia recommends these three questions for boards and others: Are we discussing the right things? Are we discussing the right topics the right way? Are we comfortable challenging the leader's opinions?

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