
Great Expectations

One Trustee's Open Letter to Executives

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I understand that you have certain expectations of me. And that is entirely appropriate. I may not know what they are exactly, but I know you have them. You may have clarified some of your expectations during my trustee orientation—if you provided an orientation at all—but I suspect that many of your expectations for me and other board members remain unspoken. You may not even be aware of them yourself until I fail to meet them and you become annoyed and frustrated.

Having been an executive myself, I have a general idea about what executives expect of trustees. I know you expect me to review the materials you send me, show up on time for Board meetings, support the organization and discharge my fiduciary duties with good humor and dispatch. You probably expect me to serve on at least one board committee, to attend organizational functions, to raise money and to lend my good name to the organization's quest for credibility. You doubtless expect me to focus on governance instead of operations and to give you my best counsel—when you ask for it. You believe you know what I need to know to be an effective trustee, and you would appreciate it if I would work with what you give me instead of asking for more or something different. When the going gets tough, you would like me to remain

supportive and patient until your initiatives pay off. If I have questions or concerns, you would prefer that I bring them to you directly instead of talking behind your back or embarrassing you in the Board meeting. I know. You want me to be easy. You have enough trouble without my annoying interference, my prickly sensitivities, or my demanding neediness. Finally, if I am not going to meet your expectation, you expect me to resign quickly and quietly, making room for someone who will.

I have certain expectations for you, too. And I want to make them clear. That is precisely the point of this White Paper. If we invest the time and energy up front to clarify our mutual expectations, we will be more likely to enjoy a satisfying relationship, work together more productively and succeed in our mutual goal of building and sustaining an excellent organization.

I want you to understand my motives for clarifying my expectations in writing. I am attempting to conscientiously discharge my duty to you and this organization. I am trying to be the best trustee I can be. I am not trying to cause trouble. On the contrary, I am trying to prevent it. I understand that this approach is unusual. This may be the first time a board member has attempted to clarify his or her expectations for you. I hope it is not the last.

At this point, you probably want me to get to the bottom line. Here it is. I expect you to be fully engaged in the pursuit of organizational excellence. I expect you to preach excellence, practice excellence and demand excellence. I expect you to build an organization that delivers exceptional results. Just being successful is not enough though. I expect you to settle for nothing less than being the best. I expect you to focus the entire organization on this quest and to document your progress along the way, to set meaningful, measurable goals and then to meet or exceed them. And I expect you to accomplish all of this with grace and goodwill, without being nasty, hot-tempered, disruptive or unethical. I have great expectations.

In what follows, I am going to outline my specific expectations and suggest some practical strategies for achieving them. Naturally, my practical suggestions are not

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the only ways to meet these expectations, but I hope they will provide some helpful guidance. Because of the leader you are, what you stand for and what you have already accomplished, I am confident that you will agree that my expectations are reasonable. You may quibble about methods or next steps, but I know you will not quibble with the goals. If, after you read and reflect on this, my expectations are still not clear, let's arrange to talk further.

Clarify Your Expectations in Writing

Board leaders and executives don't always invest the time and energy to identify their expectations for trustees, must less write them down. But there are compelling reasons to document what you expect. This

exercise will help you decide exactly what your organization needs from its board members. It will help you clarify your own thinking about which organizational issues trustees should concern themselves with and which issues they should avoid. This document will remind you about those issues you must discuss during your initial overtures to potential board members, and it will serve to focus the board candidate's reflections about whether service on your board will fit with her other priorities. This clear and concise overview will set the tone for a mutually-satisfying business relationship or persuade the pretender that yours is not the board to join. No matter how it turns out, informed decision makers make better organizational decisions.

Sell this idea to your entire board. No one will resist the notion since it is obviously such a good idea. Trustees will wonder why no one has suggested this before. Find out how your executive colleagues clarify their expectations with their board members, and incorporate their best practices into your approach. Follow up your initial visit with prospective board members with a personal letter clarifying your expectations, and invite them to call you with questions or concerns. Ask prospective trustees to send the chairperson a letter acknowledging their understanding and acceptance of your expectations. With this simple process, you will avoid many of the misunderstandings and resentments that plague most executive-trustee relationships. Clarification is the base most often untagged in our relationships with others.

Ask Trustees to Clarify Their Expectations

The people who serve on boards want to make a difference. They have ideas about how to go about it. When executives ask about those ideas early in the relationship, it sets an important tone. It encourages trustees to speak up. It demonstrates a genuine interest in their views, promotes openness, and identifies the common ground. This respectful overture

conveys respect and promotes emotional engagement in the enterprise. This frank exchange anticipates conflict and sets the stage for its effective resolution. Committed executives want trustees to ask the right questions. Encourage that behavior by asking *them* the right questions.

As a part of your initial conversations with prospective board members, make your expectations clear and encourage them to do the same. If these preliminary conversations are conducted by the chairperson or the members of a board committee, make certain that these leaders are familiar with and share your expectations for prospective trustees. After new people join your board, every meeting, social activity and retreat offers you another opportunity to clarify mutual expectations and find more effective ways to work together. The ongoing clarification process among and between executives and board members is essential to building a sustainable board culture that will support long-term organizational growth.

Conduct an Effective Orientation

Because everyone is so busy, executives are regularly tempted to skimp on this step or skip it altogether. Harried trustees are only too happy to go along. This is a serious mistake. A meaningful orientation for new board members forces executives and board leaders to decide what matters most. It forces organizational leaders to reflect on the minimum information trustees need to make credible decisions. A thoughtfully-designed trustee orientation process sets the tone for the effective teamwork that must follow. During the organizational overview, executives can introduce key organizational leaders and explain key performance indicators. It offers an opportunity to clarify the trustee role and to debunk simplistic notions and to challenge unrealistic expectations.

Make this a priority. Conduct this critical session on site and face-to-face. Handing over a three-ring binder is no substitute. Design the orientation process the

same way you design other key processes, and measure its effectiveness just as you would any other. Using the feedback you receive and what you learn by studying other best practices, systematically improve the board orientation process over time. Conduct these sessions in a manner that both reflects and supports your desired organizational culture. You know the power of first impressions. Use the trustee orientation session to make a lasting one.

Support Efficient and Productive Meetings

Board members spend a lot of time in meetings. Mostly, they show up and try to do what is expected of them—even when they don't know what that is. They don't always consider the meetings they attend meaningful or productive, but they usually keep their feelings to themselves. They understand that they are expected to be nice and go along with the group. They don't want to embarrass themselves by asking stupid questions, so they usually keep quiet when they don't understand. In this context of mind-numbing reluctance, one board member usually decides to hack at the

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bureaucratic underbrush by behaving rudely and asking stupid questions. The other trustees then feel embarrassed and study their handouts intently. Executives label the mouthy director a troublemaker and make mental notes to marginalize him. Contrary

to popular misconceptions, most board meetings are not characterized by the best available minds jousting vigorously in the pursuit of the best possible decisions.

Board meetings offer huge opportunities for executives. Well-planned and expertly-supported meetings invite careful preparation, energetic participation and regular attendance. Efficient meetings sustain commitment and enthusiasm, take advantage of members' strengths and discourage distractions and disruptions. Well-organized meetings minimize frustration and eliminate directors' greatest burden and most common complaint—meetings that sap their energies and waste their time.

Imagine you are a trustee, and then design meetings that you would find

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meaningful and productive. Provide attendees with only the information they need to make sound decisions—not everything you would like them to know. Resist the temptation to present excessive operational detail. Instead, present understandable performance data along with realistic targets, comparative data and thoughtful action plans. When seeking board approval for a proposal, present a credible business case that faces all the risks instead of a sales pitch that minimizes the downside. Finally, measure board meeting effectiveness and improve the meetings over time based on what you learn.

Adopt a Framework for Organizational Excellence

Every executive gives lip service to the pursuit of organizational excellence. Unless leaders adopt and fully deploy a comprehensive organizational model for producing and sustaining exceptional performance, it's just business babble. Publicizing management's firm commitment to a particular framework sets the expectation for organizational alignment, enhances communication and provides the impetus for external networking and benchmarking. Comprehensive models suggest performance indicators and promote organizational learning. Most organizational leaders would rather just do what they feel like doing; a structured approach encourages management by fact instead of by feeling.

Study the best performing organizations in your industry or sector. You will discover that exceptional organizations rarely fly by the seat of their pants. Most high performers have adopted a structured approach for creating and sustaining exceptional performance, and they have made that approach an integral part of their organizational cultures. Send a small group of potential champions to study the proposed model in detail and to make a recommendation about its suitability for your company. After you and your colleagues make the decision to adopt a particular framework, demonstrate your personal engagement and sustained investment in that model. Urge local opinion leaders to proselytize their fellow associates until you achieve a critical mass of committed people. At this point, the model becomes the cultural blueprint for performance excellence.

Document Key Processes

Trustees understand that sustained organizational success is dependent on processes that are efficient and predictable. The careful documentation of key organizational processes emphasizes this vital reality. Documentation decreases

variation, invites performance measurement and reveals opportunities for improvement. Understandable documentation facilitates new process owner orientation and preserves the organization's intellectual capital. Careful documentation limits the damage when key employees leave and decreases leaders' dependence on negative employees who must be kept around because no one knows exactly what they do. It is one of the conundrums of organizational life. Everyone agrees that process documentation is vital. And no one wants to do it.

Provide board members with an updated listing of key organizational processes at least annually. Involve trustees in documenting key board processes. Insist that your subordinates document their key departmental processes. Set deadlines for completion, and review the documentation yourself. Demand that process documentation be clear and concise. Prohibit the use of technical jargon or undefined acronyms. Review and update process documentation regularly. Invite new employees to review the existing policies and to suggest improvements in both key processes and their documentation. Newcomers only see clearly for a few months before being blinding by "the way things are around here." After that, their insight is lost forever.

Demonstrate the Effective Use of Process Improvement Methodology

The sooner leaders stop talking about the need to improve and actually start improving something, the better. Talk is not only cheap—it is annoying and notoriously ineffective. Deploying a proven methodology for process improvement throughout the organization suggests that continuous improvement is not the flavor of the month, that leaders are serious about it and that they are in this for the long haul. Wide-spread use of this approach promotes organizational learning, requires and demonstrates patience and persistence and calls attention to key processes and the need

for their careful documentation, analysis, measurement and continuous improvement.

There are number of ways to demonstrate your effective deployment of process improvement methodology throughout your organization. Invite a successful team to present a brief overview of their work to the Board. Acknowledge the participants by name and have them come to a Board meeting to receive the trustees' accolades in person. Publicize and celebrate incremental progress to demonstrate that lasting change is neither quick nor easy. Point out clear opportunities to improve current processes and resist the cloying tendency to tell the Board only the good news. Successful leaders talk about the good

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to inspire high performers, the bad to challenge the slackers and the ugly to humble themselves. Trustees will not be unduly alarmed by the bad and the ugly so long as *you* are duly alarmed—and passionately engaged in making a difference.

Identify Key Performance Indicators

After approving the organization's mission, vision and values, trustees expect to see results. It's true that board members will gladly wander into operational issues and process discussions. When they do, it is usually because executives have failed to focus them on meaningful metrics. Insisting on key performance indicators focuses the entire organization, including the Board, on exceptional performance. This emphasis sustains the ongoing search for better

measures and focuses everyone on the activities most critical to the organization's success. The attention required to ensure that key indicators hit their targets forces people to set priorities and inclines trustees to ask for rigorous comparative data. An emphasis on performance demands accountability and encourages everyone to pursue improvement even after the newness and initial enthusiasm have worn off.

Focus your Board on performance. Show key performance indicators, their historical performance and the current targets at every Board meeting. Limit text handouts to the previous minutes and proposed Board resolutions. Train trustees to ask for the data supporting your assumptions, recommendations and goals. Measure Board processes and document trustee performance. While emphasizing data and performance, be careful not to produce indicator fatigue. Trustees do not need to monitor every indicator in the company, just those that matter most.

Display Comparative Data

Comparative data puts management's performance in context. Managers may be improving and meeting their targets regularly while still performing in the bottom quartile when compared to their peers. Trustees will never know that

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unless they insist on appropriate comparative data. Comparative data always trigger an energizing discomfort, and it prevents leaders for settling for less than superior performance. It raises the bar since the best organizations are steadily improving

their own performances over time. Comparative data holds executives accountable for exceptional performance while informing trustees about whether the organization they serve is performing as it should. Comparative data are the brightly-lit mirrors of organizational life. They make imperfections are harder to ignore.

Find and display comparative data for each key performance indicator. Emphasize the importance of this comparative data in presentations to the board. Encourage trustees to ask for comparative data when it is missing, and stop making excuses for why it is not there. Point out the difference between average and best practice performance. Use comparative data to set organizational targets. Study, learn from and compare your own performance to Baldrige winners who have found a way to demonstrate how to stand out from the crowd. If your organization is enjoying a run of financial success, be alert for the tendency to respond arrogantly when you are asked for comparative data. Remember, arrogance is always a defense against feelings of inadequacy. Arrogant people usually don't just *feel* inadequate; they usually *are*.

Deploy Balanced Scorecards throughout the Organization

Trustees want to see evidence that managers have found an effective way to align everyone in the organization around their common goals. Balanced scorecards are excellent tools for accomplishing this. This monitoring tool focuses trustees' attention on indicators that matter, and reminds each board member of the significance of paying careful attention to the right combination of leading and lagging indicators. When trustees see evidence that balanced scorecards have been deployed throughout the organization, they know that managers are challenging interdepartmental barriers, improving communication across departmental lines and encouraging innovative collaboration among feudal lords

who formally concentrated mainly on protecting their own turfs.

Deploy balance scorecards throughout the organization, and make the review and analysis of the top level scorecard the centerpiece of every board meeting. Demonstrate the tool's usefulness to fossilized trustees who still assume that financial indicators are the only ones that matter. Acquire and show examples of other organizational scorecards and invite trustees to choose a format that is easy to explain and understand. Urge the chair to develop and update a board balanced scorecard to monitor and improve board performance. Adopt a company-wide style to facilitate "branding" and to minimize confusion. Update the data centrally to decrease errors and increase consistency. Visit and learn from high-performing colleagues and competitors, and convince trustees that they must not settle for management's excuses about why they have not identified and displayed comparative data. Set meaningful targets and provide understandable action plans to the board when your performance does not meet expectations.

Achieve Benchmark Performance

It is certainly possible for organizations to be financially successful while turning in a mediocre performance. But mediocrity does not inspire, challenge or satisfy. Striving to be the best helps companies to recruit and retain managers and employees who long to be stretched and fully engaged. Trustees want to see evidence that their executives understand this and are putting this insight to work in their organizations. The pursuit of exceptional performance pleases trustees in other ways too. It imbues confidence. It produces an enormous sense of satisfaction. It silences the naysayers and whiners. It provides a competitive advantage, and it enhances focus and minimizes distractions. It discourages jealousy and limits gossip's damage. With its obvious benefits, one would think most executives and trustees would insist on the pursuit of excellence.

But that would be uncomfortable—and most leaders pursue comfort above all else.

Make a personal commitment to demonstrated excellence, and make it publicly and repeatedly. Build a hardcore leadership team that will settle for nothing less. Select some metrics that matter and get your own hands dirty in improving key processes. Celebrate incremental achievements while never taking your sights off sustained performance. Never permit yourself or those around you feel entirely comfortable or to grow complacent or arrogant. Above all, fear success. It quickly douses the competitive fire.

Explain Key Action Plans

Every organization has plenty of opportunities to improve. After priorities have been explained, targets set and performance gaps identified, trustees want to know what managers plan to do, who is accountable for getting it done and when they can expect to see results. Meaningful action plans demonstrate intention, provide accountability and send the important signal that sustained improvement always requires hard work. Detailed plans individualize the opportunities to improve and encourage leaders to take personal ownership of their stated goals. Including the leaders responsible for successfully deploying action plans acquaints trustees with internal process owners, and recognizes motivated

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people deep within the organization. Submitting selected action plans for Board review helps to expose unrealistic expectations and invites critique from another perspective.

Inform trustees that they should always inquire about action plans when they observe that any performance indicator is not meeting or exceeding the goal. Develop an action plan template so board members know what elements to expect. Summarize the opportunity for improvement and the anticipated interventions. Identify the people who are leading the charge. Set realistic timelines and update the board on your progress periodically. Make your plans simple and understandable. Obfuscation is the final defense of the irresolute.

Highlight Organizational Best Practices

Publicizing emerging best practices in the organization challenges other leaders to create and document their own and creates the expectation for ongoing improvement. Describing these at the Board level recognizes exceptional effort and

Sadly, most organizational learning is destructive. People learn to avoid instead of confront, to hesitate instead of act and to accommodate instead of challenge.

challenges star performers to reach for the next brass ring. This recognition fuels contagious enthusiasm and promotes continuous learning. Demonstrated organizational best practices are the foundation for the energizing aspiration to be the best. They create confidence and uncertainty, pride and humility. Creating documented best practices changes people forever. They will never be satisfied with mediocre performance again.

Create best practices and present them at board meetings to inspire, challenge

and demonstrate your passion for the pursuit of excellence. Encourage process owners to present their achievements to state and national programs and to publish their results as poster presentations, White Papers and journal articles. Welcome visitors to make benchmarking trips to your organization and inform the board about these activities. Invite trustees to share best practices from their organizations to engage them more fully in your company's quest. Perhaps your trustees will seize the opportunity to examine petrified board processes with the idea of designing and documenting some best board practices. While it is unfortunately true that most trustees don't view their board commitments as opportunities for exceptional service or achievement, the expectation that trustees will vegetate pleasantly over boring luncheons ignores a substantial organizational resource.

Demonstrate Continuous Organizational Learning

Learning is inevitable. Leaders can only control *what* people learn. Trustees know that constructive learning is an important key to organizational success, and they look for evidence of management's commitment to create and sustain a learning organization every time they interact with the company. Managers who are determined to develop this core competency look to harness the energy being wasted in maintaining the status quo. Their persistence will eventually create a cultural expectation that continuous learning, unlearning and relearning is the norm. A sustained focus on individual learning drives the responsibility for improvement to the front line and empowers everyone to see opportunities, to experiment and to document improvement without the onerous requirement of convincing the bigwigs to go along. Sadly, most organizational learning is destructive. People learn to avoid instead of confront, to hesitate instead of act and to accommodate instead of challenge.

Demonstrate your personal commitment to constructive learning. Admit your mistakes publicly and characterize them as opportunities to improve. Talk about the books you are currently reading. Lionize the early adopters in your organization and complement them openly for the fortitude to live on the bleeding edge of change. Engage trustees in active learning projects and invite us to suggest ways our interactions with the organization might improve. Focus organizational learning around your strategic objectives in a way that permits creative exploration while demanding relevancy. Encourage fresh perspectives and frequent brainstorming. People rarely think out of the box when they feel boxed in.

Make a Compelling Case for Change

Change is hard. Resistance is instinctual, reflexive and intense. But the pressure on leaders to make a compelling case for change takes the focus off the resisters and places it on leaders' shoulders where it should be. Real leaders take personal responsibility instead of blaming others. Instead of whining about negative people, they focus on their own failure to make the case. They realize that they must find a way to show others what's in it for them. This commitment to persuading others forces leaders to refine and simplify their arguments, clarify their visions and to provide detailed roadmaps for the journey from here to there. It forces leaders to clarify next steps. Their ownership of the change process requires them to hold a steady course during the transition.

Make your case to a focus group of trustees early in the change process to expose the weaknesses of your argument, to identify the resistances among this critical stakeholder group and to shore up the support you will need to see the process through. Make the case repeatedly. If necessary, make the case one-on-one. Invite the hard questions, and be prepared to answer them. Remember that most conscientious trustees believe that asking the

right questions is their primary fiduciary duty to the organization. Use market forces to help make the case for change, and push your colleagues at a pace they can tolerate. Opinion leaders are scattered throughout the organization including on the board. Make sure they are with you. Marginal executives complain bitterly about how hard it is to persuade people to change. Exceptional leaders welcome the challenge.

Demonstrate Management by Fact

Let's face it. Most people need a job. And to keep their jobs, they will accommodate pretty much whatever the boss wants. Such power and influence enables leaders to act on their emotional impulses with some confidence that others will follow them blindly over cliffs. For this reason, executives should go to some lengths to demonstrate that they are acting on meaningful data instead of pursuing a hunch about what might work.

Insisting on the data resists the natural tendency to react impulsively. It focuses on performance instead of personalities and favors the quietly-reasoned case over emotional outbursts. It invites challenge instead of sullen compliance. Objective managers focus on performance, ask hard questions and inquire about meaningful indicators and benchmarks. Such leaders are naturally suspicious of the status quo. They embrace an engaging

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discomfort. Seasoned leaders view negative emotions such as anger and resentment as failures of leadership instead of evidence of passionate commitment. It's not that talented leaders avoid emotion altogether; it's just that they don't permit their emotions to call the shots.

Base your appeal on the data when making your case. Ask your colleagues for their data and encourage trustees to inquire

about supporting metrics too. Measure the things that matter and report these indicators at every board meeting. Describe your search for best practices and admit the weakness in your argument when you don't have compelling data to support your conclusions.

Walk the Talk

Everyone is watching you—especially your employees and your trustees. People want their leaders to practice what they preach. Careful attention to conducting their lives in ways that are consistent with the values they espouse everyday at work enhances leaders' credibility and influence. Walking the talk increases organizational

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alignment and emphasizes the importance of the values that leaders' want to drive the organization to higher levels of performance. Executives' conformity to organizational values sets clear expectations and inclines others to conclude that they had better conform too. Most importantly, appropriate executive behavior provides hope and encouragement to those organizational champions who are the catalysts of lasting organizational change. Executives cannot create exceptional organizational performance by themselves, but they can surely prevent it.

Make your behavioral expectations clear. Invite trustees, employees and other stakeholders to hold you accountable and to confront you good-humoredly when you slip. Take the same approach with trustees, executive colleagues and employees. Tell stories about your struggles to conform and the times that others brought your shortcomings to your attention. Publicize a

list of observed behaviors that are inconsistent with organizational values. When you see your fellow leaders behaving appropriately, make a big deal about it. Consistent leadership behavior *is* a big deal.

Tell the Brutal Truth

Always selling, leaders are naturally tempted to put the best spin on things. That approach may work with exercise equipment, but it is not the way to sustain the pursuit of organizational excellence. If exceptional performance were easy, everyone would achieve it. Both employees and trustees want executives to tell it the way it is. Those leaders who speak frankly—particularly when it is painful—earn credibility and respect. Telling the unvarnished truth convinces listeners that managers are serious about facing up to reality. Forthrightness minimizes second-guessing, rumors and misunderstanding. This approach challenges the prevailing notion that no leader can be trusted and inspires confidence that perhaps the problem is not insurmountable after all.

Begin by inviting board members to speak frankly to you about their perceptions and the perceptions of the organization's stakeholders. Be careful not to react defensively when they do. Describe your perceptions and the basis for them. Demonstrate that you are intent on hearing from honest people throughout the organization by listening to various stakeholders regularly. When you are forecasting future performance, face the complexities, uncertainties and the risks so trustees can make informed decisions. Fully-informed trustees are less likely to join the chorus of uninformed critics crying foul when things don't work out exactly as management "promised."

Demonstrate Effective Teamwork

Every executive lauds the value of teamwork. Conscientious board members expect a lot more than that. When leaders

create and nourish real teams, they develop a core competency and competitive advantage that will eventually set their organizations apart. Teams encourage collaborative relationships that focus less on individual feelings and more on the shared challenge. Teams naturally demand some specialization and interdependence, call for different perspectives, discourage “group think” and lessen the dependence on any single leader. The best teams promote individual growth, increase innovation and enhance the recruitment and retention of talented leaders. Teamwork is such a good thing. And it is so rare.

Recognize teams by inviting them to present their accomplishments to the board. Acknowledge your team’s contributions when you report exceptional performance. Share credit with others publicly and often. After all, trustees already know you could accomplish none of this by yourselves. Highlight the best practices developed by your staff. When you approve business travel, send a team and expect a project to be completed during that trip. Finally, reach outside your organization to other companies to build virtual teams with strategic partners, vendors and even competitors.

Document Exceptional Employee Satisfaction

Miserable employees don’t ordinarily produce stellar results. Most executives recognize this. Accordingly, insightful leaders pay close attention to their colleagues’ overall satisfaction at work. This focus on employee satisfaction reflects executives’ sincere interest in others’ wellbeing, and enables them to attract and keep talented colleagues. Employee satisfaction is an indicator of management’s overall commitment to customer service, to organizational excellence and to world-class results. Executives who accept discontented performers are usually willing to accept mediocre performance too.

Measure employee satisfaction frequently, and report the results on

balanced scorecards throughout the organization. Hold yourself accountable for producing exceptional employee satisfaction scores by displaying comparative data. Set realistic targets and explain your action plans for achieving and sustaining those satisfaction levels. Recognize employees’ accomplishments at board meetings and invite proud employees to share their perceptions inside and outside the organization.

Document Exceptional Customer Service

No matter what executives say or do, organizations succeed or fail during their day-to-day interactions with their customers. Trustees understand this. They will be watching to see whether management does. Managers who make exceptional customer service a priority demonstrate that they “get it.” The successful deployment of customer service initiatives reveals leaders’ determination to exploit this key competitive advantage and their abilities to encourage alignment around the issues that matter most. The presence of service champions at the front line shows leaders are properly selecting people with servant hearts and implies that the executives understand the importance of extruding negative leaders from the organization. Trustees understand that their executives are not perfect and that they will not get everything right. But they definitely expect them to get the customer service thing right.

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Make it clear to the board that exceptional customer service is a strategic objective. Measure customer satisfaction frequently and report those scores at every

board meeting and throughout the organization. Show comparative data to demonstrate that you will not be satisfied with being merely “good” at customer service. Set performance targets and celebrate significant accomplishments at board meetings. Identify the customer service champions in the organization, and give them the recognition and support they need to successfully proselytize their colleagues. Most leaders don’t want to be viewed as fanatics. When it comes to customer service, reasonableness is a mistake. Only those leaders who are customer service fanatics are likely to succeed.

Involve Trustees in a Practical Strategic Planning Process

Involving board members in the annual strategic planning process demonstrates leaders’ commitment to meaningful planning and real stakeholder engagement. Serious strategic planning welcomes widespread participation and seeks to integrate planning and future organizational results. It forces leaders to study and analyze their customers’ needs,

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their competitive environment and the best use of the resources at their disposal. Taking a practical approach to strategic planning invites trustees and other key stakeholders to share perspectives and brainstorm around strategic objectives without becoming bogged down in the strategic planning process, a process that, while vital, generates little enthusiasm even among the diehards. Successful planning, like most other endeavors in life, begins with asking the right questions.

Design a simple, understandable process, explain it briefly and then deploy it briskly. Do not waste trustees’ time with all-day retreats. Stop expecting stakeholders to come up with the right questions. That is your job. Arrange a nice working dinner to show your appreciation for their efforts on behalf of the organization and invite them to brainstorm around a particular issue for no more than one hour. Show participants exactly how their ideas will be incorporated into the organization’s final strategic plan. Don’t forget to evaluate the effectiveness of these sessions and to improve your strategic planning process as a result.

Describe the Organization’s Leadership Development Process

Board members take the long view. They understand that neither they nor the current executive team will be around forever. For this reason they want to see evidence that management is actively engaged in leadership development and succession planning. Conscientious executives take this responsibility for identifying and developing future leaders seriously. Evidence that a succession process is intentional, aggressive and ongoing reassures trustees that current leaders understand the importance of transferring a vibrant organizational culture to the next generation of caretakers.

Create opportunities for young leaders to work directly with executives. Rising leaders need to understand the executive perspective, wrestle with executive dilemmas and face executive limitations. Leadership looks so easy from the outside. Arrange for emerging leaders to observe their executive colleagues up close. They will learn much from their superiors’ shortcomings, failures and occasional successes. At the same time, as challenges increase, the bell curve widens. Differences in next generation’s talent and ability will stand out in bold relief. During an arduous developmental process, recognizing the most capable emerging leaders will be easy. Make sure that board members have

opportunities to see these rising stars in action.

Summary

Clarify your expectations of board members up front and in writing. Require that they send a letter to the Chairperson confirming their understanding and commitment before they are elected to the board.

Invoke potential trustees to clarify their expectations in writing too. The frank exchange of expectations is the best foundation for a mutually-satisfying working relationship.

Design and deploy an effective board orientation process that describes the organizational culture and the demands that this culture places on trustees. A bulky three-ring notebook will not cut it.

Design and support board meetings that you look forward to attending. If you are fully engaged, trustees will probably be engaged too.

As soon as possible, adopt a comprehensive model for organizational excellence. This approach puts everyone, including board members, on the same page.

Insist that your colleagues carefully document your organization's key processes. The duty to document may not be the most exciting part of your professional life, but it is one of your most important responsibilities as an executive.

Adopt one or more of the current process improvement tools and put them to work. But keep the focus on improving processes, not on the *process* of improving processes.

Begin measuring things that matter and never stop. It is true that you can measure too much, but not so long as you measure only what matters.

Demand comparative data. Do not accept excuses.

Design balanced scorecards around your strategic objectives. Deploy them to every level of the organization and make them the centerpiece of every meeting.

Settle for nothing less than benchmark performance. Whether leaders say they can or they can't do something, they're right.

Generate meaningful action plans and hold people accountable for deploying them successfully. Then recognize them when they do.

Develop best practices in your pursuit of organizational excellence. Document them, publicize them, extol them, and expect more of them to follow.

Create an environment where learning, relearning and unlearning occur naturally and continuously. Make it part of the job, and make it fun.

Recognize that when you want people to change, the burden is on you to make a compelling case. And if you can't make a compelling case, perhaps you shouldn't be asking people to change.

Base your recommendations on data. Even then, you will sometimes be wrong. But the odds are better.

By now, everybody knows that actions speak louder than words. And an astonishing number of executives ignore that truism every day. Don't be one of them.

Everyone expects leaders to "spin" things. Astonish them by telling it like it is. High-performing teams develop only in response to some daunting challenge that cannot be overcome any other way. Identify such challenges and then ask for volunteers.

Make high employee satisfaction a priority. Achieve it by not employing miserable people.

Involve all of your organization's stakeholders in a productive and meaningful strategic planning process. Then ask the

participants how you could make it even more productive and meaningful. Then do.

Provide opportunities for young leaders to develop their skills within your organization. Pay careful attention to how they perform. Promote accordingly.

Additional Reading

- Stewart, Kendall L., et. al., A Portable Mentor for Organizational Leaders, SOMCPress, 2003

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