Fellow Learners,

I would appreciate any an all feedback you can provide on my very rough draft.  I have to admit I as a bit conflicted about writing this, as it would appear that I am taking a position in opposition to the leader I interviewed.  For clarity, I believe that her intentions and actions were not self-serving, however they are in conflict with the course materials.

Thank in advance for the feedback!

Patrick

Interview Analysis and Recommendations

    Interviewing a leader who is also a friend is a bitter sweet activity.  On one hand it is a pleasure to engage in spirited discourse with someone whom you respect and greatly admire.  On the other remaining objective and maintaining critical perspective during the process is in a word challenging. Regardless, like leadership itself the assignment demands the interviewer extract wisdom from the exchange, assess it, apply what is applicable and attempt to rectify what is not.  Thus the balance of this writing seeks to assess the leader’s aptitude for change, analyze the change methods she employs and develop recommendations to improve them, compare these approaches against course materials, evaluate probability for success, and finally communicate lessons learned in the process.

        Change does not happen in a vacuum. Conditions must be right for meaningful change to occur and the change agent must have an aptitude for change processes.  Fortunately my interviewee was fully immersed in a change process at the time of the interview, so the topic was fresh on her mind and she was more than happy to discuss it in some detail.  The nature of the actual change initiative is proprietary in nature, and frankly outside of the scope of this course. As such the focus will be on the subject’s change triggers- the conditions that drove her to partake in the change activities, and the competence she possesses at undertaking it.  Collins (2001) suggests that great leaders leverage technology to accelerate growth. Vicky exemplifies that spirit. Functionally she had been watching market conditions develop such that a pilot project she had been nursing for sometime could flourish. In private she had been forming a guiding coalition (Kotter, 1996) of industry experts and partners to map out a product strategy should these very specific conditions materialize. Currently the device is being prototyped and sold conceptually to internal stakeholders within these same partners.  When I asked what prompted this activity of any change effort for that matter she responded that the obvious signs are always important, but what really drove her was intuition shaped by disciplined action over the course of her career. The obvious connection to course materials was impressive and encourage yet, she indicated she had never read any of the materials. Clearly Vicky is no novice to change, possesses enough conviction to take action and is disciplined in her approach. In general terms she is a highly competent change agent.

    Competence is not always synonymous with sound process. In this particular instance working outside of the firm may yield results. However, it could also create systemic issues, specifically it creates the conditions for accidental adversaries to be created (Senge, 1994, p. 145). More directly stated it is conceivable that by creating a product strategy in isolation the vision and then promulgating it onto research and development could burden on-going design efforts within the firm, thus create undue friction between complimentary agencies. Functionally this approach runs contrary to sound change techniques and should be avoided. Operational security is always paramount, yet when it serves to create silos and information gaps between interdependent agencies it should be re-evaluated. Thus far in this instance that has not occurred yet, but in my mind it may be become problem down the road as issues inherent to product development begin to emerge. However the greater issue is the apparent disconnect between the leader and the firm. Specifically did she go outside of the firm because its core competencies are out of alignment, or is this simply a personal mission.  In either case the scenario illustrates that opportunities for convergence within the firm exist.

    Poor practice aside, the change activity appears to be developed in sound market analysis. Projections for the device are very encouraging and evidence of change adoption is prevalent throughout the firm. Employees who are cognizant of the device are upbeat about its prospects. Selected pre-production trial customers are pledging orders despite the fact that the device is for all intents and purposes a non-functional block of wood.  Market studies indicate that the proposed pricing structure is in-line with customer expectations. All that remains is final specification, component procurement and manufacturing.  Barring any unforeseen obstacles the project should meet the anticipated launch schedule and create a splash in the industry.

    Practical application increases intellectual retention. One of the greatest challenges in completing an MBA program is to apply course materials to real life. Sometimes the pieces simply do not fit as cleanly as we would like. In this instance several of the key aspects of our course apply directly, and some are in stark contradiction to the reality of the situation. Namely the leader was able to confront harsh realities and take decisive action.  However, those actions tend to be incongruent to communications protocols espoused in the coursework.  For clarity I am not implying that the requisite volume of communications was not present, rather it would appear that is direction was out of phase with course materials. Assessing the situation for myself I assume that the change leader has exploiting an alignment issue between the firm and the market place. Mintzberg (1981) might suggest she is attempting to shift structures to achieve market fit. While this is clearly an indicator of confronting realities, I cannot help but wonder if it is within line with the firm’s core competencies.  Or in the vernacular of Collins (2001) is the change effort at the convergence of our three circles: passion, competence, and economic driver (p. 117) . Given this quandary I offer the following as recommendations to improve her change leadership efforts:

1. Skunk works are fine provided that the firm has tacit understanding of the market direction. More plainly stated you do not have to divulge everything to everyone, but significant market concerns should be voiced internally as well as externally.

2. Understand the ramifications of working in isolation- if the project works you are the hero, if it is fails you are the goat. Worse the animosity created could damage company moral for years to come.

3. Do not assume that everyone understands the situations as well as you seldom are “no-brainers” to “no-brainers” to everyone.

4. Older established companies tend to respond to change slowly, if the change activity is significant enough, it may be well served to create a spinoff organization. Great ideas can be delayed to the point of obsolescence by bureaucracy.

5. Extend the same trust internally as externally. Regardless of financial outcome working outside of the firm will create unnecessary friction within it.  Take the time to add colleagues to coalitions.

References

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