

Leader development versus the quick fix

Every once in awhile I have a casual conversation that goes like this: “Leadership is nice (guess what comes next), but I have real problems right now, and I have to do something; I don’t have time for leader development, I’m busy.”

In my view, we are all busy, but this sentiment is the verbal equivalent of saying, “I know that clothes are warm, I’m running around trying to stay warm, I don’t have time to put on warm clothes, I’m busy.”

Since early October I’ve been describing leadership in agriculture, leadership development, leadership effectiveness and leadership attributes that collectively create high leader effectiveness. So, I want to address what is for some, and I’m not really sure the size of this group, the elephant in the organization — that leadership is soft and ideological, in contrast to management which is all about action and measurable results.

In other words, leadership is nice, management is essential.

Half true. I love management, or rather loved management. I used to spend endless hours hovering over my financials, creating my own spreadsheets for 12 months rolling cash flow. Management is measuring and controlling actions.

It took farming through some of the most financially difficult periods in my part of Canada (the most difficult in my life so far) to demonstrate with clarity, that management, while essential to farm success, is insufficient to produce success.

There, I said it. If farms have goals around expansion, diversification, intensification or transition, then management without leadership is like tightening a nut with no wrench on the bolt head. Put the biggest impact gun you have on that nut, it’s not going work.

It’s human nature that when things go sideways, the first and often only response is to clean up the mess and move on: a missed agri insurance or investment deadline, a big canola bin heated, a destroyed header or combine because a massive rock was

ingested, a key employee leaving or employees leaving one after the other. I’ve heard some report proudly how they addressed the problem, sometimes not. Sometimes, I hear about how they engaged an expert to fill the gap and arrest the problem. Sometimes, I hear a tirade of blaming, shaming and criticism of employees, family members, and external partners

What is often overlooked is that I’ve heard stories like this from people of the same organization, even the same person before. The stories form a pattern, the pattern describes an underlying problem, and it’s persistent. It’s also costing that organization big dollars, much of which is invisible because for those on the inside, they can’t see the pattern — these stories are not connected, or if they can be, it’s rigidly asserted that they can’t be avoided. What is completely outside of their awareness, is that the factors that produce these kinds of problems can often be directly traced to the effectiveness of the leader.

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Management tools can’t attribute the financial impact to sub-optimal leader effectiveness, they can only measure the consequences.

It’s often completely outside of the leader’s awareness (there are multiple studies that strongly correlate low leader effectiveness and low self-awareness). How do you connect leader behaviour to businesses results when:

- A tough load of canola was binned as a result of the leader pushing to get done?
- The bin sensors were defective prior to filling, but were only discovered after?
- The rock was too big to be hand-picked, but the leader’s insistence that the equip-

ment was needed elsewhere — allowed the rock to be forgotten?

- Or if the over-extended, over multi-tasked administration side of the business simply missed the deadlines?

Overall, what if the people in the organization are just underperforming, and those who can are leaving?

What’s worse, this high-friction, one crisis-to-the-next approach, demanding that “others bend to the leader’s will,” is taking a mental toll on the leader and everyone around them. It’s unhealthy, unsustainable, unnecessary, and fixable. Everyone’s resiliency is eroded, and then a Black Swan hits — big trouble.

Sometimes others will bring up their observations in a way the leader can understand. This can be a spouse, business partner or key relationship. Sometimes the leader pursues development or coaching independently. They are driven to succeed, are executing their business plans, know that things can be better, and are not going to allow things to fail. They come looking for answers to get better results. Some come thinking they can be “quick fixed,” and some make that happen. (The same drive that got them there, can be redirected and focused.)

Individuals and situations vary, but an observable impact can be made in 12 to 18 months. Typically, the leader reports a significant breakthrough in busting a problem pattern. They also report how those closest to them are observing a change in behaviour that is favourable, steady, empowering and above all, effective.

The coolest part is that this is almost entirely done in real time — as they lead and work in their businesses. “Too busy” was just excusing poor focus on results.

The most gratifying moment is when each participant realizes how much influence they’ve had all along, and they’ve been creating their experience. Many report the development as life changing. All this was possible because the leader held themselves responsible, rose to the challenge and resisted the easy route of ignoring and blaming what can’t be delegated or outsourced — leadership. **CG**

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