COMMUNICATE LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS USING STORIES AND ROLE MODELS

APQC’s research study on reviving leadership capabilities examined how organizational practices and company culture come together to produce strong leadership within organizations. Five best-practice organizations that are known for excelling in leadership development (i.e., Cardinal Health, Caterpillar, Ford Motors, Monsanto, and W.L. Gore) were interviewed to find out how their cultures, processes, and tools enable them to build and sustain leadership capabilities.

One of the main findings revealed that, in addition to establishing guidelines for how all employees will lead, best-practice organizations also deliberately and continuously invest in helping employees adopt and appropriately use leadership guidelines. One way they encourage the use of core leadership behaviors is storytelling. Another is role modelling. At the best-practice organizations, the CEO, senior leaders, HR, and managers set the leadership example by providing information, tools, and teaching to help all employees learn to lead. With storytelling and role modelling, the best-practice organizations take desired leadership behaviors from being abstract concepts on the corporate intranet to actionable steps that employees use to carry out their daily work. Following are examples of how best-practice organizations use story-telling and role models to encourage desirable leadership behaviors.

HOW BEST-PRACTICE ORGANIZATIONS DO IT

Cardinal Health Stories and Role Models

Instilling leadership development into Cardinal Health’s organizational culture was accomplished in part through branding, messaging, and storytelling. Lisa George, VP of global talent management at Cardinal Health, said that the most critical factor in the quick adoption and integration of the leadership essentials has been how senior leaders model these behaviors and continue to deliver messages about the importance of the essentials in how they do their work. In addition, George said that stories from leaders make the behaviors real to employees and that storytelling keeps the importance of these behaviors front and center.

To create consistent branding and communications about the leadership behaviors that Cardinal Health wants to encourage, the organization’s talent management team worked with its communications and public affairs functions. Together, the groups created stories that conveyed how successful leaders took risks, learned quickly, and adapted and delivered innovation. Stories also highlighted employees who excelled at leading teams. Altogether, the stories made the connection for employees between leadership development and the business, as well as career success.

Monsanto Stories and Role Models

Monsanto leaders deliberately reinforce the company’s vision in their communications with employees. In global town hall meetings, business updates, and quarterly earnings presentations, Monsanto leaders talk about the vision. During quarterly global town hall meetings, senior leaders will select aspects of the vision to discuss. For example, senior leaders may talk about “producing and conserving more” while highlighting a particular Monsanto technology that helps to increase crop yields while conserving natural resources. They may also hold a panel discussion during the town hall, which facilitates conversations with multiple stakeholders such as customers, distribution partners, and retail chains. In addition, they may show a video to profile growers using the technology to grow more using fewer agricultural inputs.
Caterpillar Stories and Role Models
When asked about factors that were critical to the success of leadership development, Caterpillar indicated that senior leader commitment was most important. Charles Shao, Caterpillar’s global development manager for leadership and learning, said that it was very important for all levels of leaders to see that senior leaders believed in leadership development and modeled the behaviors they want to see from employees.

At Caterpillar, the CEO and senior executives adhere to the values in action, and this behavior cascades down to the rest of the business. Caterpillar’s senior leaders, including the CEO, teach some leadership development courses and share their experiences in these courses. In addition, Caterpillar offers communication sessions to teach employees about its values.

Ford Stories and Role Models
Employees and leaders model the behaviors outlined by the ONE Ford plan, said Tom Grant, manager of leadership and professional development. Ford leaders heavily refer to ONE Ford behaviors in their formal communications. They also discuss the One Ford behaviors in informal conversations with employees. For example, a member of the senior leadership team will ask employees how well leaders are living up to the ONE Ford behaviors and ask for feedback on how to improve. To participants in its Salaried Supervisor Institute, Ford teaches the importance of supervisors modeling the ONE Ford behaviors.

When asked to describe key differentiators that allow Ford to develop and sustain the leadership capabilities that it needs, Grant noted senior level involvement. The senior leadership team at Ford is heavily involved with the leadership development programs, which creates a rich dialogue between future and current Ford leaders about leadership and the business. Senior leaders share their leadership stories with participants and these stories help participants understand how current Ford leaders gained success.

W.L. Gore Stories and Role Models
For most of its existence, storytelling and role modeling were Gore’s main methods of communicating its values and leadership expectations. Starting in 1958 with Gore’s founders, the organization’s leadership beliefs and norms developed organically being passed on by word-of-mouth and learned through experience. In 2006, Gore began documenting its beliefs and norms around leadership into leadership competencies that it calls leadership expectations.

CONCLUSION
Communicating desired leadership behaviors to employees through a medium that is easy-to-understand and memorable is important for driving more effective leadership because it helps employees know which leadership behaviors are preferred in their organizations. When employees clearly understand what is expected of them, there is a higher likelihood that they will mirror the desired behaviors. Additionally, the presence of good role models, especially ones in executive roles, helps current and future leaders understand what successful organizational leaders do to reach their positions. Combining stories with role models yields a clear picture of what effective leadership looks like.
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