

You Know You are a Leader When...

The simple answer to the question of whether you are a leader is to look behind you and see if anyone is following you. Don't use that as your barometer because those following you may be unable to make a mature judgment of who to follow and you are in front because you are walking faster than anyone else, or you are paying them to follow you.

An external consultant, who is a subject matter expert in leadership, will look for tangible evidence before deciding whether you are a leader. Five obvious elements of leadership are evident in business organizations of all types and sizes, where there are talented leaders.

VISION

Vision is a clear, specific, and compelling understanding of what the organization aspires to become or achieve. It is universally held within the organization, and it is consistently used to direct action and to set priorities.

The great Yogi Berra said, *"If you don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else."* That was his admonition to leaders that establishing the vision is their job. Only once have I had an executive ask me to come into their company and give them a vision. Buy a vision? No, it is the duty of the leaders to establish the vision and be able to translate that vision to assure that every stakeholder in the organization knows what that vision is, can see it, and will follow the leaders to achieve it.

For those who feel they do not have a clear vision and want to create a vision employees can work toward, the process has a well-recognized template. The leaders gather off-site to avoid distractions and they allow no *"hitchhikers,"* a term applied to those who have no final accountability for the results at their company. They choose a venue where they can interact, hire a skilled facilitator to keep them focused, and spend whatever time it takes to create a vision. Whether the vision is *"Most Reliable Source for Construction Supplies,"* or *"The Low Cost Leader in Home Gardening Tools,"* it has overarching implications for the business and demands a thoughtful process.

MISSION

Leaders identify, quantify, and explain the mission to assure everyone is focused on what the organization must do to ensure success and cause the vision to become reality. It is a clear expression of the organization's reason for existence. It describes an enduring reality that reflects the company values and purpose. It is universally held within the organization and frequently referenced. It is said that Vision is why we come to work next year, but Mission is why we showed up today. You may describe your mission as, *"To prove high quality, timely and reliable service to those seeking pneumatic tool repair."* If so, it is imperative to understand that the value words are high quality, timely and reliable. To assure the company is true to the mission will demand an ongoing commitment to hiring and training staff skilled in repair, purchasing high quality parts, scheduling to assure timeliness, reliable equipment and tools, plus management oversight to ensure satisfied customers. The mission statement answers this question, *"Why am I here?"*

The same session where the vision was hammered out is the venue for quantifying the Mission Statement. It should clearly describe what the company is committed to do to provide a living for its employees and profit for its owners. It is usually written in a few simple words employees can remember, recite, and work to achieve each day. The Mission Statement is not some lofty collection of words; it is a personal commitment by everyone in the business.

GOALS

It is the duty of the leader(s) to translate the vision into a clear set of goals that the company can commit to reach, with specific timeframes and concrete measures for each goal. The goals are universally known within the company and are consistently used to direct actions and set priorities. The goal setting process follows the determination of the vision and mission. The goals are essential to assure the company can achieve its vision. Each goal is supported by clearly written objectives that follow the SMART System. Each single objective is:

- **Specific** – Objectives are written to address one achievement at a time
- **Measurable** - Quantified to assure it actually happens
- **Attainable** – Reasonable and can be accomplished in the given timeframe
- **Realistic/Relevant** – Has direct relationship to the goal and success of the business
- **Time-Bound** – Has a beginning and end date that gives it a sense of urgency

When all of the objectives are achieved, the goals are met. Every goal should help build the business and/or build organizational capacity. Goals and objectives keep the employees from “*working hard on the wrong stuff.*”

LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Leaders establish the medium to long-term strategy. It is both actionable and directly linked to the overall mission, vision, and goals. The strategic plan is the document that includes the vision, mission, goals, objectives, and action plans, and it is imperative to assure the company stays the course to realize the vision. It also includes the monitoring process that allows the leader to be assured the plan is working or is adjusted to accommodate unforeseen change.

Creating a strategic plan requires the leaders to define the Vision and the Mission first. Once done, the strategic planning process requires examination of the business strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Commonly called a SWOT Analysis, it is essential to enter the Strategic Planning process with a realistic view of those elements that can impact the success of the business. The strategic planning process is the creation of the roadmap to success and is frequently called the “blueprint necessary to get things accomplished.”

The person who announces a sales goal and a profit goal for the year is not a leader. Leadership is far more demanding and requires much more work than just calculating numbers.

SHARED BELIEFS & VALUES

Leaders embody a set of beliefs and values that are timeless and stable, even when the leadership changes; beliefs and values that clearly support organizational purpose. A common set of basic beliefs and values must exist, are widely shared within the organization, help provide a sense of connection to the organization, and a clear direction for behavior. The behavior of the leader illustrates the core beliefs and values of the company and guides employees to make ethical decisions while they carry out the mission.

Shared beliefs and values require consistent leadership. If the leaders espouse the importance of timely service but choose an unreliable delivery service to save a few dollars, they send a confusing message to employees. A business with a “*customer first*” mission will be judged by how long they allow a sales representative to ignore the desperate calls and emails from customers whose delivery was full of errors, and whose only response is that it is not his fault – “*The Warehouse did it.*”

FOOTNOTE...

- You know you are a leader when you have a vision of where you intend to take your business and it has been translated in a way employees can see your vision and follow you.
- You know you are a leader when you have defined the mission of your business and are sure employees understand the reason they came to work today.
- You know you are a leader when you have big, bold, but achievable goals, complete with a set of clearly written objectives to reach each goal, along with established accountability for each one.
- You know you are a leader when you have a Strategic Plan that was thoughtfully created after you carefully analyzed the internal and external environment and accepted the practical realities, but rejected the notion that reasonable challenges are not worth the effort.
- You know you are a leader when you embody a set of values and beliefs that are visible to employees, expected of everyone and are consistent each day in your behavior as you conduct yourself with every stakeholder.

Look behind you. Are your followers the people you want to follow you? Are they following you for the right reason? Do they share your commitment, your energy, your ethics and values, and are they committed to help you turn your vision into reality. If so, congratulations. Leadership is a scarce skill and those who have it deserve our admiration.

©This copyrighted advisory was not designed to replace the services of a competent legal advisor and is not specific to the laws of any specific state.

Nancye M. Combs, SPHR, is a Human Resources consultant and advisor to more than 700 clients on four continents. She has been the consultant at Foremost for more than ten years. Nancye has more than 35 years of practical experience in human resources. A recognized leader, she speaks, writes, and offers expert witness testimony on human resource management issues. She is a University instructor for human resources professionals seeking to become nationally certified by the Human Resources Certification Institute.

Nancye M. Combs, AEP•SPHR
HR Enterprise, Inc.
P.O. Box 6507 • Louisville, KY 40206-0507
(502) 896-0503 • FAX (502) 896-0033
www.HREnterprise.com
e-mail: nancyecombs@aol.com