

DEADLINES FORCE LEADERS TO FOCUS, MANAGE EFFECTIVELY

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Time is an issue for everyone in our busy world, and who among us cannot relate to the pressure of a deadline and the constant need to balance competing priorities? When we examine what it takes to lead effectively we often hear frustrated individuals and organizations say, "We just don't have the time to lead properly."

There is no doubt that leaders these days are under incredible pressure to achieve a great deal. However, we must not confuse busy-ness with performance. Indeed, the results of a decade-long study published last year suggest that only 10 per cent of managers spend their time in a committed, purposeful manner. The remaining 90 per cent squander their time in ineffective and unfocused activities. Some procrastinate, others feel no emotional connection to their work, and still others are easily distracted from the task at hand. However, when faced with a looming and non-negotiable deadline, this can change. With no time available to spin their wheels, leaders often act in a more purposeful manner. While they are busy, through a combination of focus and energy, they avoid getting sidetracked by distractions and are better able to stay on task. It's not a case of working harder, just working smarter.

One organization that is battling time in a unique and public way is the **Spirit of Vancouver - 2010 Winter Olympic Bid Committee**. With decision day (July 2, 2003) fast approaching, we stole a few minutes to talk with **John Furlong**, president and chief operating officer for the bid. Furlong attributes the tireless pace and the relentlessness of those involved to the compelling vision that they so passionately share. My sense is that this vision provides two critical things - the focus and the source of energy. "For anything to be strong enough to compel people to really get involved with it, it must be backed by an absolutely powerful vision of what it can do," Furlong explained. "And there lies the secret. You can't expect people to support something mindlessly." Purposeful leaders are clear about their intentions and this, in combination with strong willpower, helps them make sound decisions about where to spend their time. At the bid corporation, this means that managers must pick their goals and their battles with far more care. As Furlong explained, leaders must have the confidence to make the tough decisions and the ability to say no. When mistakes are made, people must focus on picking themselves up quickly and continuing to maintain the forward momentum.

There's no time for lengthy post-mortems.

The time pressure makes "walking the talk" a necessity rather than a "nice-to-have" for all the leaders. Furlong emphasized the importance of leaders being in the trenches and having a sense of personal responsibility for the organization's fate. Purposeful leaders feel accountable for making meaningful contributions.

With the pressures of a deadline, leaders become acutely aware of the value of time and manage it carefully. Meetings do not become a poor use of time, but instead are used to provide focus, energize the group and create a sense of choice.

As Furlong put it: "We communicate as much as we can with people. We regularly advise our people about the consequences of mistakes. We talk about things that will make us better. We try and use a little bit of every day to inspire people and to make them feel that what they are doing is crucial. Once people are inspired, you're home-free." Purposeful leaders feel a sense of choice. They refuse to let organizational restraints set the agenda. They decide what they must achieve then manage the external environment. Unfocused managers will tend to feel constrained by outside forces.

"When I hear people say that they do not have time to lead, I think that is excuse-making," Furlong remarked. "Sometimes, I think a lack of ideas is mistaken for a lack of time."

Clearly, the bid corporation is not a regular organization. Nor is it perfect. However, the lessons are clear. If you combine challenge and choice with a profound sense of urgency, you've gone a long way toward creating the recipe for success. A lack of time can be used to help individuals become more focused in their leadership. And this is something everyone could benefit from, regardless of deadlines.

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