

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP REQUIRES MAKING THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

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Leadership has traditionally been about "the leader." But while focusing on individual leadership development is a critical component, it alone is not sufficient to produce sustainable organizational results. The challenges that businesses now face require far more than any individual leader can provide.

Think about your organization's most challenging issues.

Traditionally, these have been technical challenges, but in a more chaotic workplace environment where continual change is the norm, the issues that most perplex you are likely very different. They are problems that have no easy answer and defy resolution through traditional means. These are called "adaptive challenges."

A good example of an adaptive challenge where there is no one answer or formula is within an organization that's committed to examining the issue of work-life balance. People in this organization might not know where to begin, but they know that the current situation is not working and are concerned about the consequences.

The solution requires advanced leadership development that reaches far beyond the individual and begins to address the system as a whole. Solutions are increasingly being found through the development of connectivity within the organizational system.

This connectivity is a pattern of linkages or relationships, and we see it in the depth of dialogue within strong personal relationships where people experience high levels of support and trust, risk-taking and an unflinching commitment to the good of the organization as a whole.

A critical leadership task is to develop connectivity and enhance it by intentionally developing depth in relationships.

This requires individuals and groups within organizations to work towards relating in new ways, becoming more inclusive, building richer ways of communicating, and developing leadership in flexible, organic ways as opposed to strictly adhering to rules. It demands that people come to the table ready to really listen and understand each other.

The difference between relationships and connectivity is that you can have a relationship without connectivity, but you can't have connectivity without relationships. Genuine respect, openness and a willingness to hear others before being heard are critical.

Connectivity, therefore, isn't likely to happen over pleasant chatter at the water cooler. Connections are built close to the edge - at the point where levels of stress, tension, perhaps even exhaustion, are pushed beyond the comfort zone.

We become more creative when we're on the edge. The group and organization must be willing to step into the unknown, to discover new ways of thinking about and responding to complex challenges.

Once relationships are strengthened and deepened, the next leadership task is to radically expand everyone's understanding of the challenge. When the problem is adaptive, our first job is not to solve it, but to define and redefine the challenge itself. Every individual must become more interested in understanding the issue from all possible angles than in looking for solutions. This is where real dialogue begins. It requires people to temporarily suspend their certainties, explore basic assumptions and ask questions for which they do not already know the answers.

This is an exploration and an adventure. This is how connectivity begins to emerge.

Establishing connectivity through relationship building and developing understanding of the challenges is time consuming and difficult, so use it only when it's needed most: to tackle tasks that require high degrees of complexity, creativity and interdependence.

Tips for organizations:

- ❑ Dialogue is a form of skilled, searching, critical, supportive, open and honest conversation sustained over time. Dialogue is particularly important in times of chaos and complexity when the organization becomes more fragmented, and the fragments become disconnected as each develops its own practices, languages, assumptions.
- ❑ Leadership of the larger organization requires connection, awareness and appreciation of similarities and differences, and cultivation of shared understandings. Consider hiring an outside facilitator who is able to help individuals see and overcome their initial assumptions and develop connectivity.
- ❑ Effective dialogue incorporates feedback from organization members on both the process and the results. Ensure that dialogue doesn't slip into verbal sparring or action and problemsolving too quickly.

This column is written by Kris Laroche for the "Leadership Lessons by Dr Rosie Steeves" column in BIV. Kris and Rosie can be reached at info@refineryleadership.com.