Dealing with Ambiguity—Part 2

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"Dealing with ambiguity" is a leadership skill. Rarely are the problems you face straightforward and simple. Further, the more responsibility you take on, the less certain is the path that you and your organization should take. Yet you are called upon to generate clarity from confusing circumstances.

There are two ways to approach this issue. One is a tactical focus--what are the actions that might be taken in a specific circumstance? The key is to build tolerance for errors, absorbing whatever criticism might develop over the mistakes made. Generate small decisions, seek feedback instantly, correct the course, gather more data, and keep moving forward until the situation seems more manageable.

A more strategic approach requires providing guidance to the organization where "right answers" are undefined. This is not some game that leaders play where the moderator comes forth and offers a numerical grade on how accurate you've been. The survival of the organization may depend on your ability to establish criteria where none exist.

Fortunately, Marcus Buckingham, in his 2005 book The One Thing You Need to Know about Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success, lays out a few necessary points of clarity for us.

Who do we serve? It's well known that you can't please all the people all the time. Employees who try will be frustrated. So, make it clear who the clientele is that your organization uniquely seeks to serve. The confidence of the people who do the serving is at stake.

An example that Buckingham provides is Wal-Mart. Everything associated with the world's largest retailer is designed to serve individuals "who live paycheck to paycheck." Did Wal-Mart executives conduct extensive analysis in coming to this conclusion? Nope--founder Sam Walton decided these are the people he wanted his company to serve!

What if you lead an organization smaller than Wal-Mart? Doesn't matter. Even if you lead a department of five people, your department provides a product or service of value for someone. Define that someone and their needs precisely and vividly.

What is our core strength? In his 2001 book, Now, Discover Your Strengths, Buckingham asserts that our greatest room for growth is in the area of our strengths. The concept also applies to organizations. Employees want to succeed. So what does your organization do best? As you lead your organization into that better vision of the future, make sure everyone knows where to focus, allowing you to surpass the competition.

What is our core score? When I work with clients, I ask them to show me graphs of the two or three key results areas they've tracked over the past five years. Could you do that in your organization?

Can you then translate that concept into having a measurable desired outcome for each employee who contributes to the organization's key results areas? Does each person clearly know what is expected of him or her, including how improvement will be measured?

What actions can we take today? Leaders model proper behaviors. Ideally, those behaviors lead to the two or three results areas consistently monitored for the organization. Further, these actions should be consistent with the organization's stated values, vision, and mission.

As leader, your job is to create an environment where individuals are encouraged and allowed to excel. Clearly specifying each of the above items engenders confidence, creativity, and commitment in those under your authority.

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