The Benefits of Creating a Leadership Legacy

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Leaving something behind for those who come later has significant organizational and individual value.
A classic conundrum asks, “If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” Now, consider this question in an organizational context: If a leader walks out of the office each night, each year, and at the end of a brilliant career has compiled a record of heroic successes, yet leaves no long-term impact on others, did leadership occur?

As the question implies, legacy is a crucial component of leadership. A leader’s legacy is established by leaving something of enduring quality behind for the organization and its people. Effective leadership occurs when the leader strengthens others’ capacity to learn, to reflect and to extract meaning from their learning.

It’s not up to the CEO or top management alone to create a legacy; everyone has this opportunity based on his or her own experiences and insights. However, to do so requires a new consciousness and an intention to leave value. Learning leaders may need to take responsibility to design efforts to reframe the notion of legacy as something that is not only passed on at the end of a career, but that is passed along throughout a career. Consider these legacy-leaving activities that already take place in organizations:

- An employee leaves a workflow journal behind when taking a new job.
- A manager instills the importance of process improvement in her employee. When the employee is asked to lead a project team, she fosters the use of process improvement tools, techniques and perspective in the project team’s future work. The employee looks to her manager for ongoing guidance as she leads the team in this direction.
- A consultant revisits a client’s facility and finds the client has incorporated into the company’s culture change management practices which the consultant provided during his original engagement with the organization. His client reports both improvements in morale and performance that would not otherwise have been realized.

Tom (name changed to preserve his anonymity) was a senior vice president of HR at Hoechst Celanese, a global chemical company. He took the risk and opportunity to reveal to a group of high potentials a personal situation in which he had a mental breakdown due to the way he handled the stress and pressure of his job. The story he told was poignant and unforgettable, but the message even more important — “pay attention and be aware of your behavior and any anxiety that you experience. Mental health and the capacity for proper perspective is an essential leadership competency that is too often overlooked and underestimated.”

He shared this with the company’s future leaders and continued to use his influence where he could, to stress the importance of making career choices with one’s health and family in mind. He knew what young high potentials didn’t know — that there is a price to pay for success. He wanted to influence future leaders to practice life balance — to not only speak it, but live it.

Occasionally, an individual’s contributions stick as inventions or innovations that revolutionize people and systems for years to come. These contributions are legacy worthy. However, more often a person’s contributions are incremental improvements, or an uncommon yet effective way of getting things done. These are legacy worthy as well.

An organization can capture the valuable experiences and intellectual capital of its high-performing talent for sustained excellence in future years to come if it encourages this type of long-term, ongoing building, living and leaving activity. An individual’s legacy is his or her ability to build new ways of thinking and learning in others. This in turn improves how daily business is conducted so that new levels of organizational and individual maturity can be achieved. The message of knowledge sharing as legacy was explored by Tom Stewart in a now-famous 1994 article written in Fortune magazine where he warns companies to “focus less on what they own and more on what they know; their intellectual capital.”

**The Company Legacy**

In will and trust law, a legacy is a bequest, something of value handed down to someone else. In popular use, the term usually refers to achievements or actions by which people will be remembered after they are gone.

Organizational legacies are built over time and have a living quality. In other words, people’s legacy grows and changes as they do. Legacy is people’s contributions, their value-add. Legacies do not automatically result just because something tangible comes into

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What steps do you take to build your legacy as a leader? Join the Network and discuss at tinyurl.com/8gwlbys.
LEGACY TEASERS FOR MANAGERS
Learning leaders can remind managers about the wealth of information that can be shared via opportunities that present themselves every day. The following questions serve as daily reminders:

- Do managers reflect on events with their team to make sense out of difficult events or projects?
- Are direct reports interested in the knowledge and experience of the managers they work for?
- Is mentoring a more sustainable form of problem solving?
- What kinds of storytelling would add valuable continuity and depth to the department’s work?
- How can peers learn to talk to each other about lessons learned?
- Can learning leaders play a role in debriefing employees on the new rules of thumb they gain by observing others?

someone’s possession. Unlike an heirloom, an organization’s legacy must be digested and absorbed by others before it can be passed on.

The modern definition for an organizational legacy can be stated as follows: Legacy is the valuable contribution of enhanced thinking and capacity for learning that an individual transfers to others, so that it is available into the organization’s future.

Best practice is a form of bestowing organizational legacy when individuals take the lessons learned from other companies and transfer that knowledge into their own companies. For example, 3M is known for having regular meetings and fairs that give its researchers time and space to meet and exchange knowledge. What if from that practice the CEO of a software company could fashion his quarterly top management meetings to include the board of directors in the informal idea exchange? This could lead to an innovative strategy process that includes not only the board, but customers, and the collaborative strategy process could become a company tradition.

Building legacy and living it is learning in action, and it occurs at all levels of the hierarchy. It is meaning culled from reflection and from interaction with others, and it becomes endemic if not made intentional.

Overemphasizing the leaving aspects of legacy and underemphasizing the building and living aspects is common. However, all people can build and live their legacy at any stage of their career.

Consider an analogy about the elder traditions in certain Native American tribes of the Northwest Pacific Coast. During their Potlatch ceremony, tribal leaders create living legacies by giving away material possessions. The community assesses each elder’s value or measures his or her wealth by how much the person gives away. The practice of giving something away is a key part of the ceremony, but the giving takes place while the elder is living.

In the Native American tradition, elders give away physical items. In organizations, people can give knowledge, experience and information. It is their mental wealth, and it is best given while they are present to explain, interpret and instill it in others.

Legacy is the sum of knowledge, experience, reflection and understanding turned into action, along with the ability to create new meaning from one’s own actions and the actions of others. While many people use their knowledge and can draw on experience, far fewer can truly reflect upon their actions and translate them into new understandings, new assumptions or new beliefs. The ability to do this is a kind of wisdom that is legacy worthy.

Capture Legacy Information
When an organization addresses a difficult problem, it generates valuable learning. This happens regularly in business, but only rarely — and generally by accident or anecdote — do leaders and managers cull this learning, discuss it and formally pass it on. Generally there is little or no commitment to establish an awareness of “how we did what we did” or “why it
didn’t work.” Organizations that regularly use after-action reviews gain valuable knowledge and lessons learned that can be applied to future problems. When lessons are lost, they are invisible and cannot be used to effectively address future issues or to help develop leaders who could later benefit from the experience. In other words, bypassed learning opportunities translate readily into risks and costs in the following form:

- Failure to leverage intellectual capital for future gains.
- The chance to re-create past problems.
- An inability to build capacity and bench strength throughout the organization.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Organizations can capture their employees’ experiences and insights through learning forums, mentoring activities and action learning assignments. Even though a great deal of legacy is embodied in an individual’s singular spin and style, the organization can absorb it as part of its repertoire.

When employees build and leave legacies, the most obvious payoff is for the organization. Building and living legacy activates the store of individual talent that exists within every company in a practical way, and companies are beginning to appreciate this value as an intangible asset.

One tends to overlook the important brain trust upon which organizations have become dependent. The organization that does not begin to cull and disseminate its intellectual capital will miss out on an important and valuable opportunity to capture legacy.

The Legacy Treasure

Jay Scherotter, director of learning resources and organizational effectiveness at Nationwide Insurance/Scottsdale Insurance Co., said the company’s knowledge continuity management program was important for managers to formally leave their lessons learned behind. According to Scherotter, the program minimizes the risk and cost of lost knowledge, increases the speed by which a new manager learns and assumes his or her responsibilities and duties, makes the manager feel honored, and gives customers and associates confidence there will be minimal disruption when a manager leaves.

Scherotter has been a longtime supporter of the importance of legacy leaving in his organization and has worked more than a decade to support knowledge continuity.

Those in the field of knowledge management know that knowledge has an unusual property that makes it different from other assets: Giving it away does not diminish the reserve. Legacy, when given away, actually increases the individual’s supply. When legacy building becomes part of an organization’s culture, it can serve an important role in building a learning community of employees who value both the creation and passage of information.

Legacy is not the sole province of those an organization recognizes as senior or high-ranking. Leadership is a way of acting, not a position or title. Leadership, and legacy, is for all people who want to make an impact beyond the execution of their assigned tasks. Legacy comes out of an individual’s experience and perspective and does not require a brilliant track record. For instance, learning from failure has significant value. Legacy is a valuable gift to the organization, but it is only possible when individuals are aware of the powerful legacies they have to offer.

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