

“What Are the Practices of a Disruptive Leadership Model?”

by Ted Santos

Is it possible for a CEO to create a new future for an organization? A big part of the CEO's job is to do just that. Yet many companies don't invent the future. They maintain the status quo. As a result, they become casualties of the economy or worse, the competition. Inventing the future requires one to rock the boat. Only by rocking the boat can a company create highly innovative products and services or achieve extraordinary cost-cutting results.

When you look at extraordinary leaders, you find people willing to disrupt the status quo. Nevertheless, many leaders choose to protect the status quo, to protect their investment in the existing infrastructure.

Breaking the Rules

What separates extraordinary leaders from proponents of the status quo? They break the rules. Except, not in an arbitrary or capricious way. When you look at examples of extraordinary leadership, like the Founding Fathers of the United States or Jack Welch of GE, certain practices or principles become apparent. To start, there is a declaration of intention. There is also a purpose, something to stand for. And finally, there is a clearly articulated commitment.

A powerful declaration can create a quantum leap in an organization's performance. It is a way of saying what the future will be, instead of being at the mercy of whatever the future brings. When you declare an intention to accomplish something you have never accomplished before, you simultaneously create a problem. To some, that problem looks like something to avoid at any cost. To others, it looks like an opportunity to uncover what is missing between where they are and where they want to be. By declaring what the future will be, you open a path for people. Or at least for people who share your stand.

A stand is similar to a purpose. It is what unites people. It is what they rally around and for. It is what people want to be part of now and in the future. It creates the consciousness or value system. When you say clearly what you stand for, it's as if you have created a platform where others can stand with you. For example, Ghandi stood for achieving freedom and justice by non-violent means, and millions of people joined him in this stand.

A clearly defined commitment determines what actions one will take. It may establish accountabilities. A clear commitment helps people understand who they have to be to achieve the future they have declared. We often think of commitments as promises to perform specific actions. It is much more powerful to think of commitments as promises of who we will be. A leader's commitment is a commitment of self, not merely a commitment of time and energy. There is no such thing as a partial commitment.

How Extraordinary Leaders Separate Themselves from Ordinary Leaders

Extraordinary leaders have both insight and foresight. They look constantly for what is

possible in the future. In some cases, they commit to solving an existing problem. In other cases, they seek to exploit an unexplored opportunity. In either case, they create a problem and disrupt the status quo.

For example, when the Founding Fathers declared independence from Great Britain, they created a problem. They were committed to solving the existing problem of taxation, among other issues. At the same time, that problem made it possible for a new and innovative nation to be born. Without the problem our Founding Fathers created, the US may have remained a colony, paying taxes to Great Britain with no representation in Parliament.

Similarly, when a leader declares the future for his or her company, it inherently creates a “problem.” The leader is declaring a future for which there is no blueprint. There is no proof or evidence that this future can be accomplished. Declaring a future which has never existed requires everyone involved to risk walking through the proverbial dark tunnel. The declaration breaks from the past or the status quo, demanding new thoughts, creating new needs, and requiring new skills and competencies.

In addition to declaring a new future, an extraordinary leader takes a stand for something bigger than the problem that has been created. This stand becomes the new value system of the organization, much like our Founding Fathers took a stand for freedom of the press, of religion, of speech, and so on. The stand becomes the platform from which to speak. It also becomes the common ground for everyone to be a part of. We are still a nation that stands for freedom. A powerful stand inspires and motivates people. Out of this inspiration and motivation people are driven to innovate. When people are empowered to be innovative, their commitment increases. They have a chance to take new actions and be proud of their accomplishments.

Finally, our Founding Fathers were highly committed to building a nation. They were the new nation. Out of this commitment they created an unprecedented constitution. When leaders take actions which are correlated with their commitment, they set the example for others to follow.

Turning Around a Company That Has No Problems

When Jack Welch became the CEO of GE, he took actions to disrupt status quo. His foresight allowed him to see that GE's success had made them complacent. How do you move a successful company out of complacency?

Since there were no immediate problems, he created them. He declared that every business unit had to be number one or number two in its respective industry. If they were not, the unit would be sold. Think about it. If your unit were ranked number six in its industry, you would have had a problem.

Although Welch did not micro-manage his people, he stood for them. Instead of micro-managing, he ensured they had the appropriate training and development to fulfil his declaration. Furthermore, he was committed to building a learning organization. He personally invested time to develop senior management. That way, the future he started would continue to develop long after his departure.

Continuing to Create the Future

Declarations, stands, and commitments are practices used by high-performing leaders, athletes and artists. In some cases, people have not distinguished them as practices. Nevertheless, once distinguished, they empower people to clearly define the future and the actions necessary to fulfil it.

Creating a declaration has the same power as an action. When you complete one action, you take on another. It is the same with declarations. When a declaration is fulfilled, it is imperative to create a new one. Without new declarations, the future will only be an extension of past accomplishments. In a world where change is the competitive edge, quantum leaps, not more of the same, are what it takes to lead an industry.