

LEADERSHIP Excellence

Warren Bennis



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The Power of Freedom



These horses embody the creative freedom found at Apple, thanks to the leadership of Steve Jobs.

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Leading From the Bottom

Start turning your leadership upside down.



by Graham Jones

TOO MANY LEADERS adopt a *top-down* approach to their roles. It's the *obvious, easy* option. Structures are drawn with leaders at the top, and leaders are expected to inspire followership among *the people below*. Often, I hear the dreadful word *subordinates*, which perpetuates the notion of leaders being on top, directing their minions who cater to their whims. Leaders talk about *cascading* their vision, *down!*

So the language, ethos, and culture in most organizations perpetuates and exacerbates an unchallenged protocol that leaders should adopt a *top-down approach*. But what if leaders turned their profession on its head and adopted a *bottom-line* approach?

Where Do You Start?

Most theories and models of leadership overcomplicate a role which is quite straightforward. At the simplest level, leaders are tasked with delivering performance that will satisfy key stakeholders. If this performance is to be delivered and sustained, then leaders must oversee the creation of a culture that enables it to be delivered.

So there are *three core elements* to get right: leadership, performance, and environment. But where do you start? This is where too many leaders take the easy route and start with their own leadership. Why not? Leaders usually get promoted to leadership positions because of their *personal attributes*, whether it be their experience, achievements, knowledge, skills, etc. They have reached leadership positions because of who and what they are so that it is natural that they should start from and rely on what has got them to where they are.

The environment leaders create will inevitably reflect the stamp that they impose upon it. At the extreme, there is the danger of producing clones and delivering performance which is a direct function of the strengths of the leader, but which is also limited by his or her weaknesses.

The resulting performance could well satisfy key stakeholders, but will

it reflect the *true potential* of the people and the organization? I see too many organizations where performance is constrained by the limitations of the senior leaders. Sadly, this is not just about *capability* but about their *motives*. Their *self-interest* gets the better of them and the organization comes second.

Turning Leadership Upside Down

Bottom-line leadership (BLL) is about putting performance first. But it is more than achieving the performance that keeps stakeholders happy; it's about *the future health of the organization*. Leaders often focus too much on delivering numbers-driven short-term KPIs and targets which could jeopardize their future growth and sustainability. The BLL approach recognizes the multidimensional nature of performance and



the attention that needs to be paid to other performance measures such as *innovation, people engagement, efficiency, and, clearly-defined milestones* that lead to the achievement of the *vision*.

BLLs then *define the environment* that will *deliver the performance*. What *enablers* and *incentives* need to be in place to ensure performance? What *values* will drive success? What *attitudes, mindsets, and behaviors* are required of the people who will deliver the performance? How will these things be measured?

Whatever the answers, *six critical factors need to be met to deliver sustainable high performance*:

- Individuals and teams are *clear* about what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis as well as in the longer-term
- Success is recognized and celebrated
- People thrive in conditions where *high performance expectations* are accompanied by *high support* to achieve them
- Delegation and empowerment are the norm, being underpinned by good working relationships, a feedback cul-

ture, accountability and ownership, and clearly-defined goals

- The *we're in it together* mindset is the foundation of high performing teams
- *Healthy competition* exists in the form of shared learning and commitment to everyone's development, and individual and team goals being aligned

Only when the multidimensional performance is identified, and culture required to deliver it is defined, can bottom-line leadership be mapped out.

Being A Bottom-Line Leader

Bottom-line leaders require *agility* and *flexibility* to stay in tune with their environment. They take nothing for granted when it comes to their people's commitment, loyalty, and engagement. They know that no matter how good a job they do as a leader, some people will be disgruntled and disengaged. They devote time and energy to listening to their people's views and showing *empathy*, knowing this is vital in the harsh, *new normal* commercial world.

Leading from the bottom involves building and maintaining day-to-day relationships with colleagues. BLLs may gravitate toward certain people, but they also establish good relations with others they don't always connect with. They display *humility* so people feel comfortable telling them what they think and come forward with *ideas*. This keeps them up on what's happening so that they can deal with issues quickly. *These leaders never stand still.* Whether it is driving internal change aimed at sustaining and enhancing engagement and the culture required to deliver high performance, or innovating to maintain and gain competitive advantage, BLLs strive to stay ahead of the game. This involves planning *what-if scenarios* so they are prepared for as many surprises as possible. These leaders expect the unexpected, and they are ready for it.

Of course, being a BLL is demanding. Much of their time is spent operating outside their comfort zone. *Self-belief, adaptability, and resilience* are needed when times get tough and setbacks test these leaders' inner strength. *Mental toughness* becomes a crucial attribute.

BLL is *not* focusing *solely* on delivering the numbers. It is about *ensuring the future health of organizations* by *prioritizing and defining multidimensional performance measures, creating and maintaining the environment that will deliver them, and leading in a way that is in total alignment.* LE

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ACTION: Meet the six factors of high performance.