

Assignment 2

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Book Review

Overview

The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive (Lencioni, 2000) brings to light the importance of some basic principles that every organization should follow. Through a leadership fable, we are cleverly shown the implications of how a few small steps taken by leadership can result in a massive overall impact on the organization and its employees. It also highlights the importance of leadership involvement in selecting the right staff, especially members of the leadership team. Lencioni makes this book an easy read for any leader by writing a fictitious story to which anyone can relate. Interwoven into the story are the four disciplines of a healthy organization. At the end of the story, the book states the four disciplines, along with examples, explanations, and tips to ensure that the reader understands the concepts. Reflection questions are also provided to reinforce possible consideration and application.

Agree

One of the key points emphasized in this book is over-communication. Our experience working in teams, both in the workplace and in the simulation class, has helped us to recognize the importance of over-communication. In addition, we also realize how the breakdown of communication can gravely affect workflow and interpersonal relationships. In our current workplace, physical separation of our team has created communication barriers that at times are unnoticed. Even though we communicate frequently, information is not consistently shared, resulting in confusion and lack of clarity. Consequently, the team begins to lose cohesiveness and a chain reaction of productivity and interpersonal relationship issues occurs.

We strongly support the importance of the four disciplines and how communication and clarity are at the core of creating and maintaining a healthy organization. Lencioni (2000)

stresses that employees like to know what is going on. Employees are more likely to be engaged in an organization when they are aware of organizational matters and understand how they make an impact on the organization. This aligns with our workplace experiences, and we agree that over-communication that is simple, repetitive, and distributed throughout various mediums and at all levels are effective.

Disagree

We do not disagree with the leadership model presented by Lencioni (2000). Our only issue with *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* is that Lencioni's brief definition of a cohesive leadership team does not provide readers with an appropriate depth of understanding about what a cohesive team is. In this book, Lencioni highlights the important characteristics of such a team as having high levels of trust, no political power plays, and increased operational efficiencies. However, these are not examined in enough detail so that readers can distinguish between functional and dysfunctional teams.

We can make this distinction only because we have previously read Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (2002), which examines five problems that commonly cause teams to struggle. The five dysfunctions include absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. Along with this model, Lencioni suggests actionable steps that, when applied, can overcome dysfunctions and build a cohesive and effective team. To counteract these dysfunctions, members of a team must be vulnerable with one another. They must address real workplace issues, engage one another in productive conflict, and keep their egos in check. This team must be able to reach consensus and be comfortable making decisions even when they are lacking information. They must be willing to call one another on behaviors that are destructive to the team. Finally, all members of the team must work

for the best interest of the organization as a whole, rather than focusing on their own separate silos.

Who Should Read This Book

The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive (Lencioni, 2000) should be read by leaders in all areas and levels because it addresses some critical issues that are encountered in most organizations. This book should also be read by those aspiring to be leaders. Emerging leaders will gain some perspective on actions to take and potential leadership pitfalls when entering into a leadership position and building a team. This book can help leaders whose organizations are facing issues of low employee morale get ideas on how to implement a leadership model that could provide a positive impact on their employees.

Overall anyone who reads this book will benefit from it. Having general knowledge of the principles presented in this book can aid anyone in various situations from organizational, family, relational, to sports. The model described in this book emphasis on creating healthy organizations. Each discipline in this model builds upon the other with transparency, relationships, and communication. If consistently applied, these disciplines can aid or prepare any leader.

Similarities to Course Readings

According to Clawson (2009), leaders strive to change the world. Successful leaders recognize that they can only change the world by changing the way they interacts with it. At the very beginning of his leadership fable, Lencioni (2000) presents this idea through the character of Rich O'Connor. O'Connor struggles to balance leading a successful business with having time for his family, and he is continuously searching for tasks that he can eliminate from his overflowing schedule. The true change occurs when O'Connor comes to the realization that his

assumptions about his business priorities are incorrect. Rather than selectively investing his energy in the true priorities, he was distracted by the innumerable obligations that add little value to the overall business. By changing his mindset and identifying those true priorities, O'Connor is able to develop a new strategy of interacting with his world. He reduces his focus to the four core disciplines of a healthy organization, demonstrating that changing the world starts with changing oneself.

O'Connor's first discipline is to build and maintain a cohesive leadership team (Lencioni, 2000). This discipline emphasizes that conflict is an important part of workplace dynamics. Most people think that conflict only has negative consequences and should be avoided at all costs (Northouse, 2012). However, conflict is a natural development between individuals and groups that have differences of opinion and perspective. Conflict, when handled effectively, can produce positive results, including developing interpersonal relationships, decreasing stress regarding particular workplace issues, and solving workplace problems. Lencioni (2000) highlights a particular type of conflict, where the leadership team engages in "constructive ideological conflict" (p. 142). For a cohesive team, discussions are passionate, and individual members consistently challenge one another in an effort to do what is best for the organization as a whole. This team has developed a high level of trust, has eliminated organizational politics, and is highly efficient. When arguments take place, the conflict focuses on the issues on the table rather than the personalities of individual members of the leadership team. When resolutions are made, everyone on the team accepts the final decisions and moves on to the next issue without reservation.

Differences from Course Readings

In the modern leadership paradigm, a successful organization is one that engages its

employees in more than just the work (Clawson, 2009). Organizational charters, including elements such as mission and vision statements, values, strategies, and operational goals, seek to provide employees with a higher purpose than simply punching a time clock. Building upon this foundation, Lencioni (2000) emphasizes that a leader must create organizational clarity by establishing the fundamental concepts that drive the organization, such as where it is going, what success looks like, and what needs to be done to achieve that success. Organizational clarity provides more than structure and definition. It develops “a sense of unity around everything [the organization] does” (Lencioni, 2000, p. 153). With organizational clarity, employees at every level of the organization can operate more efficiently because they understand what needs to be done, why it is important, and the urgency with which it needs to be completed.

The ultimate goal of organizational clarity is developing a unity of purpose throughout the organization. However, there are times when this emphasis on the collective mindset can also cause interpersonal conflicts. Within an organization, there are typically individual employees who do not identify with the group for a variety of reasons (Northouse, 2012). These individuals, or out-groups, may be opposed to the majority perspective; they may not identify with or be excluded from the collective; or they may lack the skills to relate to the collective. Northouse (2012) examines several strategies of how a leader should respond to out-groups that develop within the organization, but the one strategy he fails to consider is organizational exit.

Lencioni (2000), on the other hand, examines this option in his leadership fable in the character of Jaime Bender. As the newest member of Rich O’Connor’s leadership team, Bender never fully engages in the leadership team dynamic. He feels intimidated by the other members of the leadership team, he does not identify with the team mentality, and he is constantly seeking individual recognition. O’Connor is quick to recognize Bender as an out-group that will never be

able to convert to the collective group. While his instinct is to acknowledge that Bender is not a good fit for the leadership team and act decisively to remove Bender from the organization, O'Connor is convinced by his leadership team to give Bender time and opportunities to prove himself to O'Connor. The leadership team asks O'Connor to listen to what Bender has to say, to recognize Bender's contributions to the leadership team and the organization, and to help Bender feel included in the leadership team, in the hopes that Bender will make the transition to a fully committed leadership team member.

This transition never occurs, and ultimately, Bender leaves the organization. The key message from Lencioni (2000) is that there are times when it is in the organization's best interest to separate from disengaged employees. Disengagement can be detrimental to an organization, creating separations rather than unity and confusion instead of clarity. As long as out-groups do not harm the organization, leadership can respond using Northouse's strategies (2012). However, when out-groups threaten the health of the organization, leadership must take action to protect the organization. It is important to note that separation can take place in different ways. It does not always mean firing the employee, and the performance management process should be followed before a leader resorts to a solution of separation. The leader can have a frank discussion with the disengaged employee, letting him or her know that it is apparent that he or she is not fulfilled by the current position and responsibilities. During this discussion, the leader typically recommends that the employee search for a position with an organization that would be more fulfilling. Sometimes, separation is presented as an ultimatum, where the employee must either resign or be terminated. In Bender's case, members of the leadership team acted on O'Connor's behalf and presented Bender with this ultimatum.

Leadership Lessons

The main leadership lesson to take away from *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* (Lencioni, 2000) is that even the smallest actions can make a huge impact on the organization. For O'Connor, one wrong hiring decision had a catastrophic impact on the organization. It resulted in peer conflicts and divisions within the leadership team, it reduced organizational productivity, and O'Connor lost confidence in his own leadership and decision-making abilities. While certain workplace issues or decisions might not seem important enough to involve leadership, Lencioni's leadership fable demonstrates that it is critical to keep the lines of communication open and active throughout the organization.

Through his four disciplines, Lencioni (2000) provides a framework for any leader to build and maintain a healthy organization. First, a leader must develop a cohesive leadership team, which provides a foundation for the subsequent disciplines. Second, a leader must create organizational clarity, by ensuring that the organization's mission and vision is known and understood at all levels within the organization. Third, a leader must over-communicate, by repeating simple key messages, by delivering messages through multiple mediums, and by cascading messages through the organizational hierarchy. Fourth, a leader must use human systems to reinforce organizational clarity. This is done by creating consistency in human resources processes, including hiring, performance management, rewards and recognition, and employee termination.

Leadership Simulation

When examining our experience in the simulation, *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* (Lencioni, 2000) was very helpful in identifying the reasons for our team's success and clearly pointing out areas of improvement. In the simulation, we had opportunities to take on various roles and responsibilities, including a leadership role of

representing our sector in City Council. Other examples of leadership opportunities occurred when we had meetings, when we collaborated on our team paper, and when we needed to communicate and post team assignments through the discussion area. Even though we worked as a group, someone usually would take the lead in initiating conversations in the discussion area or during our online group meetings. In either the participant or leadership role, we are able to recognize the importance of the four disciplines in our simulation group experience.

The first discipline, developing a cohesive leadership team, was seen in our group dynamics when we held each other accountable for our individual responsibilities and assignments. The second and third disciplines, creating and over-communicating organizational clarity, were observed in our communication efforts over the course of the simulation. We developed mission and vision statements for our sector, as well as goals for each period of the simulation. We also communicated through the discussion boards, occasional emails, and weekly online Wimba meetings. The fourth discipline, reinforcing organizational clarity through human systems, was observed in our group processes. We established a recurring schedule for our group meetings, as well as a rotation for all team members' responsibilities throughout the simulation. Everyone was aware of what they needed to do and the deadlines by which these tasks needed to be completed. Ideally, this was a great start to our group effort. However, just like O'Connor's leadership team experience, there were breakdowns in communication and accountability within our group. One member of our team did not clearly communicate with the rest of the group, which led to operational inefficiencies. Our leadership simulation experience provided us with the perspective to witness how a lack of communication impacted our group and how important it is to over-communicate, emphasizing, simplicity, repetition, and delivery through multiple mediums. By clearly communicating our expectations and holding our team members

accountable, we were able to have a successful group experience in the end.

References

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