

Fast Lane Staying focused

How to keep distractions from swaying you from your vision

By Mark Scott

Smart Business Columbus | October 2009

James R. Klein is a firm believer that every CEO needs a "Radar O'Reilly," just like the one Col. Potter had on the old TV series, "M*A*S*H." Radar was always there to deflect some of the less important obligations to allow his boss to focus on what truly mattered at that moment, says the CEO of Finance Fund, a 24-employee nonprofit financial services firm.

"It's somebody who manages your day-to-day schedule and becomes the triage that moves some of those pieces of minutiae somewhere else to a part of the system that wants to deal with it," Klein says.

When you have that person in place, you can focus on the business and on keeping everyone in step with what it is you do best.

Smart Business spoke with Klein about how to keep your company aligned with its vision.

Q. What is the biggest hurdle to staying on track with your vision?

The main job of a leader is to be able to have a broader view of what is happening in your corporation. The complexity of this whole thing can be brought down to simple principles: Remember who you are. Know what you're all about and what you're trying to do and trying to accomplish. In organizational management, that's called question zero. It's the question you ask before you do anything else. You need to ask yourself that periodically, maybe like every morning.

Then you need to figure out what your role is. Have a good idea of who is working with you. Who is on your staff? What are their skills? What is their thought process like? You need to be able to have people you trust and give them specific tasks that you don't have to micromanage.

What I mean by trust is, you need to be able to trust that what they are telling you is the truth. You don't want people that are going to tell you what you want to hear. You want them to be able to tell you what the reality is whether you like it or not. You have to establish an environment that fosters that kind of reality.

If you don't, you head off on a path that's not real and you'll find yourself in trouble.

Q. How do you engage these people in your vision?

Create an environment that entices employees to act on their own. If you're a leader type that needs to be in on every decision, you create an environment that tests the edges of patience for everyone. The corporation becomes inflexible.

Have a number of different teams that have team leaders that have the job of directing thought and activity around certain parameters that you establish. Then you drive yourself to the next step.

Supervisors are encouraged to do things that attempt to maintain the entrepreneurial character of every position. We do that by just talking about it a lot and by looking for people who come with definite skill sets who are able to handle work tasking of particular positions.

But we also want people who have a broader view. They understand what the mission of the organization is or they are willing to listen and learn and get on board.

You can tell when an employee has a role that is changing from a job to a career. It seems as though their passion blooms. You can just begin to see how the passion for the mission begins to impact how they do their job.

Q. How do you ensure that your people really do hear you?

Those leaders that I have observed that are very good at it work hard at it. They establish relationships. They develop a reputation of knowing what they are talking about and being truthful and caring with their staff.

They are willing to concede that the staff is part of the whole mission you are presenting. They are not just an afterthought, but what they are is an essential piece of what you do. Leaders make them feel as though they do an important thing, whether they are putting labels on envelopes or they are saving lives, they all feel part of the whole.

What makes one leader go that way or one leader go a different direction? I think it's a mix of personality and intelligence and really being able to be brutally honest with yourself.



James R. Klein, CEO, Finance Fund

I'll tell you the honest truth. I've done some pretty stupid things in my time as a leader. There are some things I just wish I hadn't done. You need to be brutally honest with yourself, admit those mistakes, learn from them and put your face to the wind again.

Q. What's the secret to being a good communicator?

There is a distinct tendency to be insulated from what's actually happening so the vision gets tied up in me and everybody else doesn't get to hear about it.

I try to write every week into a blog that talks about where we are and what we are doing and how we're thinking about things. That's connected to everybody. It's public, and we urge our staff to look at that. I also do writings that move to the staff about things that are coming up, ways we operate as a corporation, different strategies we would like to pursue.

I would like to have an environment that is free and open and trusting, but the environment becomes what it is. I have to put trust in certain leaders within my organization to move this message.

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