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Become an Agenda Mover

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Tuesday, November 01, 2016 - by *Samuel B. Bacharach*

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You've come up with a great idea; now what?



During the past two decades, leadership training has gained importance in organizational life. According to a 2016 Association for Talent Development report, *Experiential Learning for Leaders*, "In a volatile business environment where rapid change is the norm, organizations struggle to provide current and relevant leadership development. But the inability to prepare effective leaders puts companies at significant risk for poor financial performance, strategic execution, competitive capability, and other vital elements necessary for businesses to survive." So the question that must be asked by talent development professionals is, "How does any individual

leadership training affect the business?"

In my years as an academic, having trained hundreds of leaders and having led the implementation of leadership programs in many organizations, I've learned one fundamental lesson: If the training doesn't resonate with the reality of the business, then it doesn't matter what HR or the talent development team thinks.

In a world where there is pressure to lead for change and innovation, networks have replaced hierarchies, solution sales have overcome product sales, and turf and global teams are omnipresent, knowing how to move an agenda through the maze of organizational life is the ultimate test of leadership. Therefore, in a competitive organizational world that demands perpetual innovation and change, leaders at all levels of the organization must master the skills of the agenda mover.

When training leaders as agenda movers, the focus should be on four critical competencies: anticipate the agendas of others, mobilize their campaign, negotiate support, and sustain their campaign.

Anticipate the agendas of others

No matter how good an idea, if a leader wants to move innovation or change, the first thing the leader has to do is homework. That means moving the focus from his own "good idea" to the agendas of others.

Agenda movers understand that to move an agenda, they have to identify who will be on their side and who will not be. It may be helpful at this point to analyze the stakeholders and determine where the power lies—for example, knowing who the gatekeepers are, or those individuals with authority only in a certain department.

Anticipating the agendas of others is only the first step. Talent development professionals can

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help leaders who wish to become agenda movers anticipate the "yes, but" games others will play—that is, to figure out the core arguments of resistance that others may use.

Agenda movers map out the terrain of resistance by figuring out where other people are coming from and sensing how well they may receive a particular idea. For instance, a leader with a traditionalist agenda archetype is likely to reject an idea that is completely novel, and a revolutionary will likely be dissatisfied with any initiative that doesn't challenge the status quo.

Mobilize their campaign

The next challenge agenda movers face is mobilization. That is, they need to adopt a coalition mindset. To move an agenda, they need a core group of individuals who will rally around their ideas with some sense of purpose, cohesion, and intent.



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This does not come about as a result of charisma or the simple brilliance of an idea. Rather, to mobilize others, agenda movers must methodically focus their message, establish their credibility, and understand the nature of the support they really need. Each of these actions is fairly specific. To focus the message, agenda movers have to decide if they will unveil their idea to a group or if they will share their thoughts with key people individually. Agenda movers show credibility by proving that they can deliver and by exhibiting traits that show that they

are the ones who should lead the project. Agenda mover leaders appreciate that they don't need everyone on board. A constant stream of cheerleaders can cause headaches. But having varied support from different quarters can ensure a degree of success, and appreciating whether that support is passionate, passive, or reluctant, for example, also is critical.

Being able to mobilize the individuals who you need on your team is a developed capacity—one that a talent development professional can help hone in a leader.

Negotiate support

The next stage for agenda movers is to negotiate the buy-in from potential supporters. Getting initial support is easy because nothing has been exchanged. Buy-in is quite different and implies a commitment to a coalition and a proactive agenda to move things ahead. This requires leaders to have a mastery of coalition negotiation.

To negotiate support, agenda movers make it clear to others how they benefit from joining the change effort. Agenda movers reduce others' anxieties, deal with their fears, and if necessary, are prepared to make power arguments. Agenda movers have a toolbox of micro-negotiation skills that assure them the support they need. They will use the appropriate tools depending on whether they are dealing with the traditionalist, revolutionary, or—one of the other two archetypes—adjuster or developer.

Sustain their campaign

Agenda movers translate the energy of mobilization to the energy of implementation. One common mistake that leaders make is that they spend so much time mobilizing support for their agenda that their energy wanes as they approach the finish line.

Sustaining the team's forward movement is just as important as mobilization. Agenda movers make sure that, in spite of obstacles and setbacks, momentum is sustained. It means constantly coaching and enhancing team members, pivoting and making adjustments, and making sure that team members aren't burned out. Agenda movers manage with agility while

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remaining politically astute.

The agenda mover perspective emphasizes the leader's—and would-be leader's—ability to work ideas through the maze of the organization. Innovation and ideation are popular given the current business climate. But unless the ideas are executed, the leader has achieved nothing. If training doesn't have a positive impact on the capacity to execute and deliver results, then it will be dismissed as an uplifting, but irrelevant, exercise.

If execution and getting things done is the litmus test of leadership, effective leadership training programs should focus on the behavioral nuts and bolts of moving an agenda. The agenda mover perspective focuses on the political competencies and skills necessary to mobilize support, and the managerial competencies and skills to go the distance. Without these core capacities, organizations will quickly learn the adage that a good idea is not enough.

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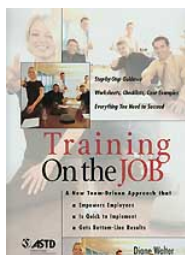
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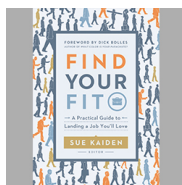
Samuel B. Bacharach

Samuel B. Bacharach is the co-founder of the Bacharach Leadership Group and the McKelvey-Grant professor at Cornell University. His most recent book is *The Agenda Mover: When Your Good Idea Is Not Enough*.

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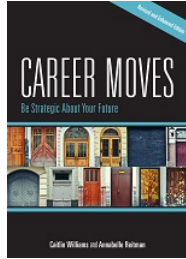
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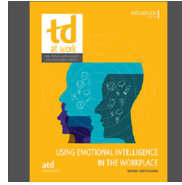
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