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Strategies and Challenges Towards Development of Social Impact Leadership

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ABSTRACT: A leadership strategy for societal impact is a variation that recognizes the interdependence of organizational success and positive societal impact and develops the leadership required to be effective on these terms. The key feature that distinguishes a societal leadership strategy is the focus on leadership both inside and outside of the organization in support of addressing specific societal needs and results. The key feature that distinguishes a societal leadership strategy is the focus on leadership both inside and outside of the organization in support of addressing specific societal needs and results.

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership strategy for societal impact is a variation that recognizes the interdependence of organizational success and positive societal impact and develops the leadership required to be effective on these terms. The key feature that distinguishes a societal leadership strategy is the focus on leadership both inside and outside of the organization in support of addressing specific societal needs and results. Such leadership strategies are typically plural— no single strategy exists on its own. Societal impact requires collaborations within networks of organizations and communities, each pursuing its own agenda, business strategy, and leadership strategy with an eye on the others. Creating a societal leadership strategy begins with discovery. A discovery process takes a close look at the realities—the opportunities and challenges—facing the organization. The process drives dialogue on the topics of mission, business strategy, leadership, society, and impact. It clarifies how these topics are understood within and beyond the organization. The internal lens of the discovery process is to highlight the nature of the leadership required to achieve the organization’s mission, given the challenges and opportunities present. The external lens for the discovery process is to assess the societal spheres, desired impact, and requisite leadership development, including stakeholders, partners, customers, competitors, and even antagonists, working on challenges locally and globally. The internal and external elements are intertwined; the process is iterative.

II. FOUR LEVEL LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

The formation of a leadership strategy flows from the discovery process. To create a leadership strategy for societal impact, we need to think more systemically and act more collectively than is the norm in most organizations and with most leadership development efforts. This means that leadership must be developed within and across all levels or scales of human activity— individual, group, organizational, and societal. The formation of a leadership strategy flows from the discovery process. To create a leadership strategy for societal impact, we need to think more systemically and act more collectively than is the norm in most organizations and with most leadership development efforts. This means that leadership must be developed within and across all levels or scales of human activity— individual, group, organizational, and societal.

LEVEL 1: DEVELOPING INDIVIDUALS

Individual development starts “from the inside out.” This means that each person has an evolving inner self and social identity that is the foundation for leadership development. Each person is on a path of potential growth and maturity. The list of individuals within an organization who may be developed for leadership roles should include practically everyone. All employees play some role in shaping and maintaining shared direction, alignment, and commitment. Everyone is a part of the broader system of leadership. That said, senior leaders within organizations remain critically important. They must step up and go first, as role models, by engaging in development for themselves and the senior team. When the senior team is aligned around the new strategy and leadership imperatives, then leadership development typically moves to the middle and then the front lines of the organization. Organizations must also look

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externally for opportunities to develop individual leaders. As leadership becomes more open and democratic, more people must be trained as leaders and citizens. For example, Coca-Cola helps small business owners in Latin America develop modern management skills so they can compete with big-box retailers. Another example of external individual leadership development is the increasing interest in developing the next generation of leaders through education systems and community groups. A growing global movement supports the formation of young people—younger than 18—as leaders, emphasizing the maturation of character in the form of discipline, communications, learning agility, self-awareness, and adaptability.

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Level 2: Developing Groups and Teams Group and team development is a big part of the leadership capability of any organization or community. High-performing teams get things done. Leadership of these teams is both distributed among members and focused in a few outstanding leaders. A leadership strategy needs to spell out what kinds of teams are needed and how they will be developed. While developing leadership capacity within groups and teams is important, it is not enough. The ability to create DAC among various groups and teams, spanning difficult boundaries, is key for creating societal impact. Trust within and among groups is critical. Building trust takes time, persistence, and goodwill. Trust can too easily be broken—especially when working in uncharted territory with unfamiliar partners. For example, leadership strategies at Coca-Cola emphasize the importance of the establishment of trust and mutual respect, in order to foster collaboration and interdependence—both internally across teams in Coca-Cola and externally with the WWF teams, the DEKA project teams, and their many other collaborators.

Level 3: Developing the Organization Culture sets norms on everything in an organization: how to share bad news, whether to take risks, whether and how people are developed and promoted, how people interact with one another, how problems are solved. When people say “it’s just the way things are around here,” they’re talking about culture. Leadership culture is the part of the culture that sets norms for leadership. Fully implementing a strategy for societal impact often means changing how the organization is managed—its policies, systems, and processes—as well as how decisions are made, what takes priority, and what people understand about how they are to go about doing their jobs. Leadership development tied to societal impact typically requires an evolution to more interdependent cultures and mindsets among the collaborating organizations and their members. Interdependent leadership cultures are characterized by practices driven by the belief that leadership is a collective activity that requires mutual inquiry and learning. In general, interdependent cultures can be thought of as collaborative cultures. Other characteristics associated with interdependent cultures include the ability to work effectively across organizational boundaries, openness and candor, multi-faceted standards of success, and synergies being sought across the whole enterprise. Interdependent cultures are successful in adapting to rapid changes in which it is necessary to work inter-systemically, internally as well as with external partners and collaborators across the value web. Well-considered and clear leadership strategies—both internally and externally—are needed to guide these transformations, or else old patterns of management and leadership will prevail.

Level 4: Developing Networks of Organizations Impact at the societal scale requires multiple organizations working toward similar ends. Networks of organizations—some with close ties, some loosely aligned—have the potential to solve problems and enact change in ways no single organization or small group can. But working within networks of

organizations involves working with different missions, cultures, and leadership strategies. Some of these will inevitably be in conflict with one another. In collaborating with partners for societal impact, leadership strategy questions include:

- What are the key similarities and differences in the cultures of the partnering organizations?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses with respect to each partner's leadership capabilities?
- How will we build bridges among our partners, including ourselves, so that we can align our efforts?
- How will partners, competitors, and adversaries manage conflicts based in differing goals and commitments?
- How can partners support each other's leadership and leadership development? The structures for collaboration and leadership development within networks vary—and in many ways are untested or evolving. One option for realizing collective impact is to set a unified leadership strategy which integrates the shared work of the organizations. In this approach, a single “backbone” organization formally unites the partners around a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations. For example, John Kania and Mark Kramer cite the case of Strive, which was a backbone organization around which other individuals, groups, and organizations could galvanize action:

III. THE CHALLENGES AND THE POSSIBILITIES

Efforts to enact Corporate Social Responsibility or create shared value are often viewed with skepticism by employees, partners, customers, community members, and other stakeholders. Some doubt and misgiving is well-founded. British Petroleum had strategies for social and environmental responsibility when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. Another challenge to enacting strategies for societal impact is that organizations often disagree about big priorities as well as specific actions. Bridging those differences isn't easy. It is difficult to assess the net societal value of any commercial enterprise. In fact a strategy may result in both the creation and destruction of societal value. Walmart, for example, has a number of strategies for creating more positive social impacts, such as an organic produce initiative and improving its carbon footprint. Yet, the massive retailer has many critics. The societal leadership strategies of Walmart are not often aligned with those of other organizations working on related social issues. The long-term societal effects of its strategies remain to be seen. As the thinking and practice of collaboration for creating shared value evolves, we suggest that an agile approach is needed. We see that an effective leadership strategy for societal impact will involve multiple perspectives within a network of both tight and loose ties.

IV. CONCLUSION

It will include both collaborators and antagonists, from a variety of sectors, each with their own version of a business strategy and a leadership strategy. It requires flexibility and learning as each collaborator is—more or less—successful in inside-out development, spanning boundaries, creating headroom, and holding dialogue with other organizations. The challenge is to engage effectively and reflectively in this dance of interdependence.

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