



The ABC's of Effective Management and Leadership

The pressures of successfully leading a business have never been greater than they are today. There is an incredible amount of obtainable advice, much of it quite good, but one of the pressures we all deal with is not having enough time to read, digest, and make best use of the excellent material available. Written for those who have a limited supply of time, this article is intended to offer its share of advice on how to effectively manage an organization and lead people, be it in good times or not as good. But first, I wish to acknowledge Miss Hourning, my first grade teacher at Willow Road School, who instilled me with a lifelong fascination for my ABC's.

A: Accountability, Agility, Action

One of the greatest gifts any leader can give her/his employees is allowing them to be **accountable**. A surprising number of managers find this difficult to do, but it is as necessary as getting over this fear is remedied. Accountability is not built in to an organization by decree either; it requires commitment to behavior changes. Leaders conducting themselves with uncommon **agility** are able to create a doing culture, focusing employees on reaching lofty goals rather than not failing. From this basis of trust and commitment to shared results, employees can then take the appropriate **action** as they are now truly vested in a businesses success.

B: Balance, Brevity, Build

It is true, all work and no play does make Jack a dull boy, and it is also truer that if your employees only view you as the boss you cannot connect with them on a human level. Your **balance**, demonstrated by your words and actions, manifested in your behavior, is the difference between your being someone others work for or someone others want to work for. Employees pay close attention to everything you say or write, and the grapevine is usually fertilized by employees encoding your messages. To avoid the hazards of anyone misinterpreting or ultimately misrepresenting your message, mean what you say and say what you mean. **Brevity**, without sacrificing content or context, is your best device to clearly communicate with employees. It would be nice if one did these things for purely altruistic reasons, but the purpose of leading a business is to profit and prosper. Everything you say and do has to have a single-minded purpose: to **build** a successful organization, one that is routinely driving positive results.

C: Creativity, Conviction, Credibility

I can't remember the last time a sales person didn't try to get my interest up by promising me anything other than to save me time and money. Even if this is true, this phrase has become so clichéd that it is now automatically tuned out. Your organization can best differentiate itself in the market, against competitors or anyone fighting for a buyer's interest, by **creatively** positioning itself. This is not to be confused with the merely clever, and to be certain your (prospective) client really hears you, be sure to communicate with the greatest sense of **conviction**. The combination of creativity and conviction inevitably leads to **credibility**, and rule number one for getting and keeping clients is they have to both trust and believe you.

D: Dare, Determine, Deliver

Accountable employees taking the kind of action you want them to in the pursuit of building your business need to be challenged. **Dare** yourself and your people to challenge conventional wisdom and break their routine. **Determine** an acceptable range for failures in the pursuit of excellence (we don't want anarchy, just an abundance of creativity!), while making it clear that errors by omission are intolerable. **Deliver** on your promises to instill this in your culture by recognizing those that tried and succeeded as well as those that tried and fell short.

E: Energy, Efficiency, Execution

As you can tell, we're all about breaking the routine. This can only be accomplished through an abundance of **energy** in your workplace. But there is nothing more frustrating than a hardworking group that gets very little accomplished. As the leader, you must ensure, demand, great **efficiency** throughout the organization. Best intentions, hard work, and great spirit are all meaningless without superior **execution**. Through your actions you are creating a truly wonderful place to work, and only those capable of driving results can qualify for membership.

F: Fearless, Flawless, Finish

Your pact with employees (as they say on Sesame Street, "Brought to you by the letter D") requires that you allow others to fail on occasion. This is a very tough thing for most of us to do, and the only way to get over this hurdle is to first trust your judgment. Once you have supreme confidence in your judgment, you will then trust your employee's instincts. At minimum, this means you have to be a **fearless** leader because you will otherwise second-guess yourself and your people. And while you allow for failures in pursuit of excellence, the ultimate standard for performance at all levels is to be **flawless**. If you believe this is too rigid and impossible a standard to shoot for, would you fly an airline that expected anything less from its pilots? If you are true to these principals you will then be able to **finish**, which is sum of flawlessness and fearlessness. Self-doubt is usually at the core of unrealized potential, for people and a business.

G: Greed, Generosity, Govern

The word **greed** might have negative connotations for many, but without it, what is the point of a business? By setting high standards for employees and ourselves as leaders, we are asking everyone to make certain sacrifices. All participants deserve payback for this and should be rewarded for their contributions. While greed usually means money, it can also be rewarding people with extra time off because they are greedy about their leisure hours. To appeal to the self-interest that defines greed, one must practice uncommon **generosity**. One can better **govern** the organization when they have proven themselves to be as good at giving as they are at receiving.

H: Hire, Hear, Help

If you have made it this far, then you have reached a natural conclusion: not everyone is suited for an environment like this. How you **hire** is arguably the most critical of all success factors. You must remain uncompromising in your standards. Once you have brought someone into your organization, you must spend time with her/him and actively **hear** what he/she is experiencing on the job. Through this active process you can then **help** these capable people contribute to your success as you intend and expect they will.

I: Involve, Instruct, Implement

A remote leader will simply be unable to accomplish any of this. And to make sure things are working to your high expectations, you must **involve** yourself with the daily activities of each department. This is not to micromanage, but to understand so that you can properly **instruct** your employees, ensuring everyone is on the same page. From this shared firsthand knowledge you and your organization can then **implement** the best methods and practices.

J: Judge, Joust, Join

It takes a particularly strong manager to trust employees to the degree we advocate, and in this highly imperfect world you must use your skills to reserve the right to **judge** an employee's competency and fit for their job or your company. On occasion your initial impressions might be wrong, so employ the best known method to find out: **joust** with a suspect individual to determine if she/he is truly up to the challenge. While this should never be conducted in a public forum, the outcome—good or bad—will impact your firm. And while no names need to be divulged, make a point to **join** back with the larger organization to reinforce its values.

K: Kindle, Kinship, Kudos

Energy is an important ingredient for your success, and it is created as well as sustained through an inspiring force. As leader, your responsibility is to routinely **kindle** these flames and this is best achieved by constructing a family-like culture that has great **kinship**. Just as we do not allow for substandard behavior, we must make a point of celebrating successes by liberally extending **kudos** to deserving employees.

L: Listen, Learn, Level

To help employees, we hear them. To make sure our best-laid plans are working you owe it to yourself to really **listen** to what both internal and external sources are saying about your company's performance. Use this information to **learn** what must be done to close any gaps, and once you have a good sense of what the required action might be **level** with yourself first, and anyone who might be in need of coaching or counseling. Again, it is imperative to mean what you say and say what you mean. But if you fail to understand the subject matter what you say and mean might be irrelevant.

M: Message, Method, Market

Your business is not limited to an internal constituency. To attract, gain and keep clients you need to have a compelling **message**, one that clearly articulates your unique value equation. This message cannot be delivered in a haphazard way, and constructing the right **method** for delivery is essential to your success. And although "Build it and they will come" makes for a memorable line in a movie, it is one of the costliest lessons from the dot.com implosion. Before you invest dollar one in sales or marketing efforts, be certain you have identified a healthy **market** that has a true demand for your product or services.

N: No, Not, Now

Your efficiency is a prerequisite for a successful enterprise, and it is a function of your ability to know, set and keep priorities. While you need to maintain a degree of flexibility, you also cannot allow intrusions to keep you from fulfilling your primary responsibilities. It is therefore very acceptable, downright encouraged, to let people know that you are not always available for them. The discipline of **no, not, now** either as a single sentence or as individual words (no, I reject the request; not, we will not meet a request; now, as in this being an inopportune time) will not only help keep you on course with your priorities, it will also reinforce accountability throughout the organization.

O: Optimize, Organize, Operate

As they are finite, resources are your most precious assets. Whether it for human capital, finances, inventories, time, or any other scarce resource, the effective manager always looks for the best way to continually **optimize** the company's resources. To do this, a manager must routinely **organize** resources by indexing availability to priorities. From this platform, the company can **operate** most cost-effectively.

P: Purpose, Process, Payoff

Many years ago, I was a struggling sales person who was unsure how to structure a business meeting. My boss at the time introduced me to the wonderful concept of **purpose, process, payoff**, and I have run virtually every meeting since that time with this in mind. Each meeting starts with a statement of **purpose**, which ensures everyone understands why the meeting is being held. This is then amplified by describing what the **process** will look like, a verbal "table of contents" that details the agenda, topics to be discussed, and the method we will use. These introductory remarks conclude with **payoff**, answering the most important question any meeting attendee will ever pose "what's in this for me?" I still don't know if Mr. Steele came up with this on his own, or if he got it from another source, but I am eternally grateful for having learned the power of these three words.

Q: Quick, Qualify, Quality

There have to be at least a few letters you're particularly interested in, if only to see if I stumble. You won't find it in Q because there are important common leadership characteristics in this much-maligned letter. One of the reasons why business executives are starved for time is because they have to process an incredible amount of information each day. Part of their time crunch is of their own doing because they do not prepare themselves to make smart decisions on the fly. One must learn to make **quick** decisions, and be right about them. To dispatch good decisions quickly, one must first **qualify** the relevant facts. This means keeping the analysis phase to only what's important, cutting off any conversation that does not belong. And if the right answer is not self-evident, let **quality**—as in the company's product or organizational performance—be your guide.

R: Respect, Refuse, Reward

Respect for the individual, in all ways and at all times, is paramount. But our definition of respect is likely a bit more stringent than most. Because we respect someone's competency and overall capabilities, we won't pander to underachievers. Indeed, as the busiest of 2-way streets, respect for the individual means a leader must **refuse** to accept anything less than an employee's best effort for the sake of all stakeholders, the employee included. And we must properly and routinely **reward** employees who drive positive results.

S: Standards, Systems, Solutions

Unity of command is perhaps more valid today than when the concept was first introduced. To establish the necessary unity of command a leader must hold herself/himself to the highest possible **standards** and make them part of the company's fabric. For instance, if we allow for slight cheating on an expense report, then we have blurred the lines of acceptable behavior. Once these lines are blurred, they are never restored. Indeed, we should expect further erosion throughout the organization. To assure that standards are consistently applied and adhered to there must be appropriate **systems** in place. These systems will monitor and measure our organizational behavior and performance against the established company norms. Standards and systems are employed to provide **solutions** either to issues that commonly trouble businesses or something more particular to a given firm.

T: Trust, Test, Terminate

These ABC's are designed to create a high performance organization. The very foundation for high performance is **trust**, and it must be a sacred company value. Yet, in the real world we live in we occasionally come across individuals who fail the **test** of working in this kind of environment. Here is a perfect situation for dispatching a quick decision: **terminate** any employee who cannot measure up in this vital area.

U: Understand, Unemotionally, Unencumbered

Right next to trust, crystal clear communications is a crucial driving force. In the role of leader you will regularly be confronted by a number of challenges, even if you do run a high performance organization. To be most effective you need to truly **understand** the factors of any situation, and be prepared to **unemotionally** evaluate them. Doing so will position you to render the best decisions as your judgment will be **unencumbered** by false, misleading, or erroneous information. Practicing this to perfection is one of the best ways to reinforce your aforementioned standards.

V: Vigorously, Validate, Values

As a leader you must stand for something, and as a member of the greater society so must your company. Company **values** are not bullet points on a company mission statement, but the glue that binds your organizational purpose and construct. As leader you must continually **validate** these values are shared and upheld by all members of the firm, **vigorously** protecting and preserving them from any offenses. Values remain the philosophical underpinnings of one's standards, and like standards they can never be distorted.

W: Will, Well, Win

Building a superior organization requires great **will**, and to prosper and profit as you intend to you must reach down to find this strength. But guts alone don't get results one also needs performance. A shared commitment to doing everything **well** is also required to **win** in any competitive endeavor. Make no mistake about it; succeeding in business is as competitive as the most brutal contact sport, with our wins and losses calculated in monetary returns. There can be no option but winning, and there can be no other way to realize this than by being very good at what you do and maintaining a fabulous commitment.

X: X-Ray, X's & O's, X-Factor

Yes, X was much tougher than Q, but the use of jargon should not diminish how important these matters are to a company's success. Inspection of the company's operation, as it relates to internal as well as external matters, ideally done with **X-Ray** depth and precision will help keep the company on course. While there are some who believe "The Devil is in the Details", we firmly believe that indeed "God is in the Details", and they are found in the daily X's and O's of a business. Your staying current with this will be your company's **X-Factor**, and is certain to provide you with that extra competitive edge.

Y: Yield, Yang, Yet

While your company history serves as its foundation, success is a future-orientation. So while you must leverage the existing strengths, one must welcome new ideas and approaches with open arms. This means a leader must **yield** to the positive energies of the **yang** of what is **yet** to come by constantly renewing your business and its competitive posture.

Z. Zeal, Zany, Zowie!

Your great **zeal** for leading the organization will inspire the entire team to reach for, and ultimately grab, the stars. This means you introduce part process and part madness to your company, encouraging people to come up with even the **zany** ideas that might help propel the firm. This is what "out of the box" thinking was supposed to be before the phrase got trampled on and reduced to cliché status. But if you really commit yourself and your staff to these concepts your results will be so through the roof there will be only one word to describe it: **zowie!**

Now you know my business ABC's of effective business leadership and management.

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