

Letting Go While Holding On

by Jon Craighead

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review immediately caught my eye. The article was titled To Be a Better Leader, Give Up Authority. What's so interesting about this article, as the title hints, is that it is a complete challenge to traditional thinking. It begins:

In chaotic times an executive's instinct may be to strive for greater efficiency by tightening control. But the truth is that relinquishing authority and giving employees considerable autonomy can boost innovation and success at knowledge firms, even during crises. Our research provides hard evidence that leaders who give in to the urge to clamp down can end up doing their companies a serious disservice.

When you take away talented employees' ability to think and create, you effectively disable them to produce the results you hired them to produce. If you are reluctant to turn over a large measure of the planning, design, and implementation of your company's innovative future to your designated leaders, then a serious assessment of your talent pool is indicated – and the sooner the better. Otherwise your future viability is in serious question.

I recognize that this is not a new or unique proposal. Nonetheless, our experience is that leaders, in general, find it hard to let go the reins of authority. In many instances leaders find that passing the leadership torch may seem irresponsible. In other situations senior leaders may feel displaced and no longer needed in such a climate. The reality is that when leaders are creating leaders, they are more in demand than ever. Smart employees are reluctant to separate themselves from their leaders, and as they move up the ladder they are more likely to seek advice, compared to simply carrying out instructions. How many of us began to learn and appreciate our parents more as we became parents ourselves – what's the old saying? – *"The older I get, the smarter my parents are."*

In an article in the December 2009 Fortune magazine titled "CEO Swap: The \$79 Billion Plan," Jennifer Reingold compares the succession planning programs of General Electric and Procter and Gamble. Both these companies initiated lengthy and comprehensive programs to insure the continued success of their respective company's future in the selection of a new CEO. Their programs, which were very similar, targeted high potential managers and put them in highly transparent assignments. Their increased responsibilities were then closely monitored in a system of varied and complex issues

to evaluate which candidate had the highest likelihood of success. As they moved through the system, the potential CEOs were given more and more complex assignments, while being monitored by the enterprise's senior leaders and consultants. They were offered little or no input, but were provided high quality support when requested. Reingold contrasted these programs with unsuccessful companies that had little or no programming in effect and were forced into action when the need arose. The most recent example of this is General Motors.

Locally, most leaders don't have multibillion-dollar companies to manage or be concerned with. However, all our companies are faced with the same issues: how to insure competent leadership heading into an unknown future. One consistent fact is that an effective program doesn't start the moment it's needed; it starts at a significant point long before its implementation. A good way to get started is to select your best prospects and start putting them to the test, giving them assignments to move the company forward with specific goals. The candidates should be responsible to create programs with all the significant particles to be reviewed and coordinated with their sponsors, who will monitor the process. The sponsors must be the most senior leader or leaders, preferably the CEO. This is a critical element of success, and it should be given a lot of consideration and guided by someone of experience. If this process is begun carelessly it will likely be the cause of failure.

In summary, this is a process of trust and partnership, with group and personal dedication. These elements will be the foundation for success. It takes patience to loosen the reins of control and simultaneously monitor when to pull in the safety tether. The process can be slow and at times arduous. When brought to a successful conclusion, it is the most competent way to insure the organization's future. That's what we work for day to day: to insure that our products and services make the greatest difference. It is very satisfying to know that our work will continue beyond our tour of duty. That makes it worth all the sweat and effort. All the while, as we enjoy our success, we are simultaneously providing a launching pad for those who follow us.