Your Legacy as a Leader

By looking backward to look ahead at their potential legacies, leaders may be able to create better futures for their organizations—and themselves.

If you don’t want the only mark you make on an organization to be the one on your own rear end as you go out the door, then the time to think about your “leadership legacy” is before you enter a new position, not as you’re about to leave.

“It’s never too early to think about the kind of influence your leadership will have after you’ve retired or taken a position with another company,” argue management consultant Robert M. Galford and business journalist Regina Fazio Maruca. “In fact, we believe that the earlier leaders begin to consider their leadership legacy, the better leaders they will be.”

A leadership legacy is basically a values statement and, as such, reflects personal beliefs and goals. Because it is an attempt to look backward at one’s life and work from a point in the future, a legacy is likely to define success differently than would a strategic plan or mission statement.

“Put simply,” Galford and Maruca write, “we found that looking forward, people want to achieve success in organizational or performance terms. But looking back, they wanted to know that their efforts were seen—and felt—in a positive way by the individuals they worked with directly and indirectly.”

Legacy thinking allows leaders to put their personal values to work in ways that have long-term impacts on their colleagues and employees—and hence the organization—as well as to assess how their own decisions and actions measure up to their values. The goal is to leave behind you a set of positive and empowering values embedded in the organization.

Galford and Maruca cite the experience of the restaurant chain Wendy’s in 2005 defending itself against a fraud case as an example of how a leader’s legacy influences the organization’s future. When a customer claimed to find a severed human finger in her food and sued, the company could have settled the matter quickly and quietly by paying her off. But instead, CEO Jack Schuessler worked with investigators, stood by his employees, and protected the brand. Schuessler credited the legacy of Wendy’s founder Dave Thomas “that a reputation is earned by the actions you take every day, and that’s still our credo.”

The legacy-thinking process is a useful personal discovery tool even for nonleaders. In one of many illuminating case studies in the book, Galford and Maruca quote a young businesswoman of bright prospects who found herself in the uncomfortable position of leading an important project:

Right at the end of the meeting I said something like, “I know we can do a great job on this.” And then I said, “Just don’t f*** it up.” . . . I can look back on that now . . . and see clearly that I was trying to do a job that I really wasn’t suited to do and did not, in fact, enjoy much.

She chose a different role for herself than leadership, and a more ap-
propriate one for her organization:

I came to realize that I was happiest when I was helping the people around me do “their stuff” better. Not when I was telling them what to do, but when they already knew what they wanted to do and I could help them achieve their goals. To use the language of legacy thinking, I learned that there was too much of a conflict, for me, between the positions I had held and sought, and the roles that fit me best and brought me the most satisfaction.

Your Leadership Legacy offers this valuable lesson: that our actions and attitudes have an influence on other people, though subtly or in ways that may not be immediately felt. We are all role models, whether we are leaders or not, and whether we know or accept it or not. Even thinking occasionally about how our neighbors may one day remember us could help us become better citizens today.

As expressed by Barnes Boffey of the nonprofit educational organization Aloha Foundation, “Our lives become the stars that others steer by, and if we live them well, the world will change.”

About the Reviewer

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Profits and Prophecy

Turning the Future into Revenue: What Businesses and Individuals Need to Know to Shape Their Futures by Glen Hiemstra. Wiley. 2006. 226 pages. $24.95.

Glen Hiemstra's unambiguously titled Turning the Future into Revenue (a sell-out at the World Future Society’s 2006 annual meeting) seems to acknowledge that business leaders are not necessarily future-averse just because they focus on meeting quarterly profit estimates or increasing share value. They may just need some practical guidance on understanding the impacts of the conflicting, converging, and confusing trends we face.

Business futurist Hiemstra, founder of Futurist.com, here provides a clearly written overview of business-relevant trends in the major sectors of futures analysis (society/demography, technology, economy, environment, and government/policies) and guides the reader through the potential impacts and—more valuably—inspirations for new ways to turn a profit.

For example, shrinking populations in Europe and Japan would represent a crisis to businesses that only see a dwindling customer base. But Hiemstra finds the silver lining in fewer people demanding the same amount of resources. “The same resources available to fewer people ought to, if managed well, lead to greater per capita wealth creation,” he notes. “This is particularly true when combined with prospects for ever doing more with less and less, as Buckminster Fuller used to say.”

An opportunity is environmental improvement. If shrinking populations lower the cost of living in downtowns, it could help curb suburban sprawl, Hiemstra points out, recommending the development of policies to enhance urban living and return once-sprawled-upon lands to a more natural state.

A workforce that’s shrinking due to an aging population also presents opportunities, such as to develop technologies and policies that enhance worker productivity. Hiemstra suggests “mid-life retirement” or universal sabbaticals in which workers nearing the traditional retirement age take time off to reeducate themselves for new careers—keeping themselves and the economy productive.

Hiemstra’s book is both practical and visionary, business oriented and personal. He concludes with a mission statement for humanity—a “twenty-first century do-over”—that encompasses a rapid conversion to the next (post-petroleum) energy era, universal affordable connectivity through broadband communications, an integrated global labor system, and a reawakened “hunger for peace rather than war.”

—Cynthia G. Wagner