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How Leaders Kill Meaning at Work

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Leadership / Leadership Mistakes
Life Advice / Purpose

Take-Aways

- To execute bold strategies, don't gauge your managers' performance with outmoded or unrelated metrics.
- Leaders should not lose focus or give managers contradictory signals.
- Don't discourage managers by constantly updating their objectives and priorities.
- Don't overreach with grandiose goals.

Recommendation

According to McKinsey consultants Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, America's CEOs and corporate leaders often inadvertently destroy their managers' inner lives. The authors describe four common morale-destroying behaviors that top executives can avoid. When McKinsey surveyed managers at seven major American corporations, it found corporate leaders avoided the four morale killers in only one company. This article may help ground executives lost in the stratosphere of grand strategy.

Summary

To execute bold strategies, don't gauge your managers' performance with outmoded or unrelated metrics.

Influential leaders provide their managers with vision and actionable, relevant goals. Leaders who give clear marching orders engage their management team and enrich individual managers with a sense of purpose in their work.

"Beyond affecting the well-being of employees, inner work life affects the bottom line. People are more creative, productive, committed and collegial when they have positive work lives."

Using outdated systems or metrics to gauge that work is the first morale-destroying leadership mistake. Senior executives may advance a bold strategy and still frustrate their managers with quarterly accounting systems or outdated enterprise performance targets that reward risk-averse behavior, reinforce mediocre performance, and hobble innovation and creativity. Instead, offer managers morale-boosting incentives for meeting benchmarks that measure their real progress toward fulfilling those elements of your strategy that they control.

Leaders should not lose focus or give managers contradictory signals.

Top-tier executives need to stay the course once they commit to a strategic direction. Changing direction is the second leadership mistake that undermines morale. The drive to be on the cutting edge can distract leaders from their primary strategic goals and tempt them to redirect resources and project teams toward dead ends.

"As described in one engineer's diary, the attempts of many teams to move forward with their projects were continually thwarted by signals from marketing that conflicted with those coming from R&D and other key functions."

Be sure your internal departments are aligned. Don't destroy your credibility by issuing unclear or inconsistent directions from various offices that undermine your managers' faith in their leaders or their sense of meaning.

Don't discourage managers by constantly updating their objectives and priorities.

When memoranda and directives come from on high, managers expect coherent marching orders. Leaders can rally their subordinates by putting forth a clear, compelling strategy with tangible metrics of success that are within reach of their troops.

Aware leaders who understand their subordinates' perspective take steps to boost morale, and their teams often outperform their competition.

"Managers at all levels routinely – and unwittingly – undermine the meaningfulness of work for their direct subordinates through everyday words and actions."

You may be committing the third morale-damaging leadership error that undermines managers if you downplay the importance of their products or concepts, shift team members around mid-project, fail to update your team, or frequently change your managers' targets and priorities.

Don't overreach with grandiose goals.

Beware of setting out well-meaning but utopian missions that are beyond your corporation's abilities, resources and management reach and that burden your employees with impossible tasks. "Establish world peace," for example, is a grand aspiration, but it has no practical meaning in the average worker's day.

"Such statements are grandiose, containing little relevance or meaning for people in the trenches. They can be so extreme as to seem unattainable and so vague as to seem empty. The result is a meaning vacuum. Cynicism rises and drive plummets."

Senior executives know that their primary responsibility is to develop a business strategy, but as they do, they must make sure their employees remain engaged and can see that their high-level executives respect and empower them. Motivate your employees by setting smaller, incremental goals, so they can measure and celebrate progress. Show recognition for small successes.

Leaders who remain aware of the human dimension when they communicate their vision have more success aligning their managers' behavior with corporate strategy than those who plunge ahead heedless of the impact of their directives.

About the Authors

Teresa Amabile teaches at Harvard Business School where she is the Edsel Bryant Ford Professor of Business Administration. **Steven Kramer** is a freelance writer and researcher.



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