

“A Seat at the Table”

Influence and Leadership

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Introduction

Over the last several months, as a participant in the OCG’s Leadership pilot program, I have enhanced my appreciation of the qualities required of a leader and perhaps more importantly, some of the unique attributes that distinguish *an auditor* as a leader. Specifically, what I have learned is that effective leadership requires authenticity, humility and an ability to be ready to adapt to the immediate environment. For auditors, however, leadership is typically exercised through influence rather than authority, in so much that an auditor frequently acts as an advisor as opposed to a decision maker. To this end, honing the ‘influencing’ skill is an important objective for any auditor who seeks ‘a seat at the executive table’.

My paper briefly explores the ‘art of influencing’ and examines various theories that can be applied when working with our superiors, peers and/or direct reports.

Influencing Up

Respecting authority is a critical ingredient in any subordinate relationship, but this should not translate to simply parroting what is heard above or blindly accepting direction without consultation or challenge. According to Baldoni (2010), “the individual who leads up will be one who helps the leader see the big picture, think creatively, and do what is best for the team and the organization.” To do this effectively there are several things to consider, including being prepared, open-minded and realistic about risk.

For auditors this speaks to anticipating questions and alternative perspectives as well as avoiding making assumptions about how information may be received. This is also about having the courage to speak up when necessary and to ensure that important information, even if unpopular, is brought forward. It is equally important to demonstrate initiative and the ability to follow through when tasked to take on innovative or challenging projects.

Leadership

“Most of us look to leaders in our lives for direction, guidance, encouragement and inspiration. We’d like to be treated with appreciation and respect. We’d like to know what is expected of us and feel confident that we can deliver”.
(Crowley et.al. p.3)

A seat at the executive table demands the auditor to find comfort in uncertainty, challenge respectfully, and think creatively.

The ability to influence up is also linked to reputation and credibility and this is where leveraging corporate and professional networks comes in handy.

Laterally Support

In most modern board rooms, the former ‘silo’ approach to problem solving is being replaced with an expectation of ‘cross domain’ collaboration. Solutions to corporate problems are seldom singularly housed in one functional area and necessitate the coordination and strategic thinking of multiple disciplines.

As auditors we often have a unique vantage point, or bird’s eye view, within our organizations. Our work enables us to explore the business both horizontally and vertically, enabling us to connect dots and link initiatives. To this end, leveraging our relationships, engaging in dialogue with professional networks and collaborating with internal colleagues can go a long way in strengthening our ability to influence up. As previously mentioned being prepared is a critical component within the ‘influencing up’ strategy. Bringing forward information that has been reviewed and challenged by peers can only enhance the credibility of the thinking conveyed. In addition, presenting material that demonstrates a corporate view or a strategic vision is often the missing piece of the puzzle and is information that is eagerly sought by decision makers. Auditors who successfully engage in lateral support will not only ‘come to the table’ prepared, but will be equipped with a multi-dimensional perspective.

Another important element of leadership is securing the trust and respect of the team. The next section examines some of the prevailing sentiments related to motivating teams and promoting a culture of high performance.

Building Team Trust

Behind every great leader, one should expect to find a great team; and an abundance of trust. According to McChrystal (et. al. 2015): “the connectivity of trust and purpose imbues teams with an ability to solve problems that could never be foreseen by a single manager – their solutions often emerge as bottom up result of interactions, rather than from top down orders.” Teams who trust their leaders tend to be highly productive and highly motivated.

So how does a leader build team trust? Again deferring to research conducted by McChrystal (et.al. 2015): “the leader acts as eyes-on, hands-off”. “Eyes on” implies that the leader possess solid situational and contextual knowledge, is decisive and sets clear expectations. Sutton (2010) describes “hands off” with the following analogy: “after you plant a seed in the ground, you don’t dig it up every week to see how it is doing”.

Perhaps the 'coaching circles' within this pilot program best articulate how to remain 'hands-off'. In this forum what I appreciated the most was the importance of asking questions that provoked thinking and reflection rather than posing questions that led the individual to predetermined or pre-experienced solutions.

What then, is the connection between high performing teams and influencing up? Let's return to the idea of reputation and credibility. Over the past few decades research on leadership has agreed that what singles out 'greatness' in leadership is not so much *what* was accomplished but *how* it was accomplished. One can therefore attribute a high performing team with a leader who is exercising authority in a manner that is sustainable, appreciated, and engaging. The leader sitting at the executive table that has a productive and motivated team behind him/her brings to that table a solid reputation and an abundance of credibility.

Conclusion

As part of this pilot program, I have learned to distinguish the unique vantage point an auditor brings to the executive table. As leaders we need to demonstrate a competence that transcends authority. We need to exercise the skill of 'influencing up'; we need to collaborate with our professional networks and colleagues; we need to be authentic and accountable and earn the trust of our direct reports. As a result, we will secure a firm 'seat at the table.'

By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is the noblest; second, by imitation which is the easiest; and third, by experience which is the bitterest. (Confucius):

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