

# LEADERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR LEADERSHIP IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

*Dave Ulrich & Norm Smallwood*

**A**ny good leader wants to be better. And committed leaders invest to improve themselves. They attend training, invite coaching, take performance reviews seriously, participate in 360-degree feedback, and continually identify what they can do to be more effective. And yet, even with all these investments, many leaders are not making the improvements they desire or that their organization requires. Unfortunately, too few of them implement their good intentions.

At the end of every leadership improvement effort, participants need the discipline to do what they desire and to turn their aspirations into actions. Leaders need to sustain the changes that they know they should make.

One of our favorite cartoons shows a group of turkeys who attend a two-day training program to learn how to fly. They learn the principles of aerodynamics and they practice flying in the morning, afternoon, and evening. They learn to fly with the

wind and against it, over mountains and plains, and together and by themselves. At the end of the two days, they all walk home.

So often desires for improved leadership become dashed against the realities and headwinds of making change last. We can orchestrate leadership events like training and coaching in which individuals learn why they should lead and what they should do to be better leaders. The greater challenge is how to turn these events into an ongoing pattern. We call turning leadership events into patterns *leadership sustainability*.

The concept of sustainability comes from a consideration of the environment and context of the organization. Environmental sustainability is about caring for the Earth's resources by reducing carbon footprint. Leadership sustainability is about caring for the organization's resources by getting things done. Leadership sustainability is not just what the leader does but how others are affected by the lead-

er's actions. We judge ourselves by our intentions, but others judge us by our behaviors. Leadership sustainability has to show up not only in personal intentions but in observable behaviors. Leadership sustainability is about caring for the organization's resources by adapting and changing leadership patterns consistent with organization requirements. Environmental sustainability gives back through social responsibility initiatives. Leadership sustainability occurs when leaders take personal responsibility for making sure that they do what they say and know they should do. Environmental sustainability is a long-term commitment to changing the world in which we live and work. Leadership sustainability is a lasting and durable commitment to personal change. It may start with learning agility, but it has to show up in leadership actions.

Leadership sustainability matters and is the next step for real improvement in leadership. We believe the challenges of leadership can be captured in three phases (Table 1):

1. *Why*: Why does leadership matter?
2. *What*: What makes an effective leader?
3. *How*: How do leaders sustain their desired improvements?

## Why Does Leadership Matter?

In our work, we have explored five results that leaders need to deliver:

1. *Employee*: Leaders increase employee productivity by building competence, commitment, and contribution among the workforce.
2. *Organization*: Leaders must build sustainable capabilities that shape an organization's identity.
3. *Customer*: Leaders ensure customer share by creating long-term relationships that delight target customers.
4. *Investor*: Leaders build intangible value (which is about 50 percent of a firm's market value) by creating investor confidence in future earnings.
5. *Community*: Leaders establish their organization's reputation by becoming active community citizens.

Because leaders deliver these results, they matter to those both inside and outside the organization.

## What Makes an Effective Leader?

If leadership matters (the *why* question), then what must leaders know and do to make that important difference? As we thought about this question, we began to focus on the importance of brand as a metaphor for defining leadership. The concept of leader-

Phase and Leadership Challenge	Leadership Question	Leadership Failure	Our Work
1 Need	Why: Why does leadership matter?	Failure of rationale. No one is making a strong case for leadership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Results-based leadership</li> <li>•How leaders build value</li> <li>•Why the bottom line isn't</li> </ul>
2 Vision	What: What is our theory of leadership? What does it mean to be an effective leader? What are the right standards of leadership?	Failure of accuracy. Leaders and leadership are not doing the right things.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Leadership code</li> <li>•Leadership brand</li> <li>•Why of work</li> </ul>
3 Action	How: How do I become a better leader? How does my organization sustain leadership by weaving it into the organization systems?	Failure of sustainability. Leaders don't finish what they start.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Leadership sustainability</li> </ul>

TABLE 1. THE EVOLUTION OF LEADERSHIP THINKING: WHY AND WHAT, NOW HOW

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## *The metaphor of brand starts from the outside.*

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ship brand as the metaphor for effective leadership draws on two conceptual shifts in leadership thinking:

1. *From a focus on the leader as a person to a focus on leadership as a capability within the organization.* The metaphor of brand is more about leadership than about the characteristics of individual leaders.
2. *From a focus on what happens inside the leader or inside the firm to a focus on meeting customer, investor, and other external expectations.* The metaphor of brand starts from the outside and focuses clearly on business results.

Leadership brand offers a robust definition of what makes an effective leader. It translates customer expectations into internal behaviors so that leaders ensure that employees deliver the desired customer experience whenever they touch the customer. We further found that leadership brand is made of two elements: the code and the differentiators. The leadership code represents the basics of leadership that all leaders must master. We have identified five domains of leadership effectiveness: strategists who shape the future, executives who get things done, talent managers who engage today's talent, human capital developers who invest in tomorrow's talent, and personal proficiency or taking care of oneself. Consistent with the brand metaphor, we also believe that leaders inside a company need to tie their knowledge and behaviors to expectations of customers outside.

The code represents the basic DNA that all leaders must demonstrate. Leaders' DNA shows up in behaviors they practice. The differentiators are the unique behaviors that leaders do that reflect customer expectations. In organizations with a focus on innovation,

leaders take risks, experiment, and seek for new ways to do their work. In organizations with a focus on customer service, leaders spend time on segmenting customers, knowing customer expectations, and delivering on those expectations.

We (and many others) have articulated why leadership matters and what good leadership looks like. We have spent countless days on both the why and what of leadership. But, we still struggle with the how.

### **How Do Leaders Sustain Their Desired Improvements?**

Most if not all the leaders we work with know the importance of leadership for their organization's success. Most also want to be better leaders, and this leads them to adopt personal improvement goals, to participate in training and development activities, and to invest in leadership of others in their organization. In leadership workshops or coaching, we often start with three questions:

1. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), how important is leadership either for your personal or organizational success? Most answer 8, 9, or 10.
2. What specific things do you need to do to be a more effective leader? Most can quickly write down two or three desired behaviors.
3. How long have you known you should improve these behaviors? Most meekly acknowledge that they have known what to improve for three, six, twelve months—or longer (decades for some).

In this simple exercise, we don't discount the why and what of leadership, but most leaders still don't see their aspired improvements. These improvements may come from a stronger desire to lead better or from being able to upgrade the right skills. But we believe that many leaders are at a point of diminishing returns by focusing only on the why and what of leadership. By shifting attention to the how, leaders emphasize finding ways to sustain desired improvements.

To determine how to build leadership sustainability, we reviewed and then synthesized a number of lit-

eratures to identify principles of sustainable change. Some literatures and exemplar books are noted below in Exhibit 1.

Each of these ideas is good in its own right, but to make sense of them in an integrated way it is necessary to reduce the concept clutter. To do that, we synthesize these diverse areas of research into seven principles that drive leadership sustainability.

### 1. Simplicity

Simplicity addresses the importance of focusing on the key behaviors that will make the most difference to the most important issues. The world is increasingly complex; technology makes global events local news. Leaders have to cope with complexity not only in the world around them but in their personal leadership styles. Most leaders create to-do lists of things they should change—but they get overwhelmed when they try to change them all at once. Leadership sustainability requires finding simplicity in the face of complexity and replacing concept clutter with simple resolve. It entails prioritizing the behaviors that matter most, shifting from analytics with data to action with determination, framing complex phenomena into simple patterns, and sequencing change.

### 2. Time

Leaders continually take and need to pass the calendar test. It takes up the question of the allocation of days, hours, moments. We often ask leaders we coach to tell us their priorities, which most can do. Then we ask them to review their calendars for the past thirty or ninety days and show us how much time they spent on these priorities—an exercise that often reveals unnerving gaps between intention and reality. Effective leaders build their desired behaviors into their calendars, and this shows up in how they spend their time. Employees attend to what they see leaders do far more than to what they hear them say. Leadership sustainability shows up in who we spend time with, what issues we spend time on, where we spend our time, and how we spend our time. When leaders invest their time as carefully as their money, they are more likely to make change happen.

### 3. Accountability

A cycle of cynicism occurs when leaders announce wonderful aspirations (organization vision or strategy and personal mission statements) but fail to deliver. Over time, this cycle breaks down trust and erodes commitment. Leadership sustainability requires leaders to take personal responsibility for making sure that they do what they say. Accountability increases when leaders expect and accept personal commitments from others and follow up on those commitments. Accountability increases when leaders make sure that individuals make personal commitments to act and then follow up on those commitments. Over time, sustainable leadership occurs when the leader's agenda becomes the personal agenda of others.

### 4. Resources

Resourcing implies institutionalizing. Steve Kerr, formerly chief learning officer at GE and Goldman Sachs, made the clever observation that a training challenge is to make an unnatural act (for example, listening to others) in an unnatural place (a training program) a natural act in a natural place. Coaching and HR practices create part of the infrastructure of sustainability. Marshall Goldsmith found that when leaders have ongoing coaching, they are much more likely to enact desired behavioral change. We have found that a mix of self-coaching, expert coaching, peer coaching, and boss coaching can be woven together to resource sustained change. HR practices often define and create an organization's culture. Selection, promotion, career development, succession planning, performance reviews,

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## Making Change Happen

- Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*
- James Prochaska, John Norcross and Carlo DiClemente, *Changing for Good: A Revolutionary Six-Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward*
- Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, *The Knowing-Doing Gap*

## Influence and Persuasion

- Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*
- Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*

## Changing Habits

- James Claiborn and Cherry Pedrick, *The Habit Change Workbook: How to Break Bad Habits and Form Good Ones*
- M. J. Ryan, *This Year I Will . . . : How to Finally Change a Habit . . .*
- Mark F. Weinstein, *Habitually Great: Master Your Habits, Own Your Destiny*
- Jack Hodge, *The Power of Habit: Harnessing the Power to Establish Routines That Guarantee Success in Business and Life*
- Debbie Macomber, *Changing Habits*

## Self-Discipline (Self-Help Books)

- Brian Tracy, *No Excuses!: The Power of Self-Discipline*
- The Dalai Lama, *Becoming Enlightened*
- Jim Randel, *The Skinny on Willpower: How to Develop Self-Discipline*
- Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*
- Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*

## Leadership Derailment

- Sydney Finkelstein, *Why Smart Executives Fail: And What You Can Learn from Their Mistakes*
- Tim Irwin, *Derailed*
- Adrian F. Turnham, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*

## Leadership Development

- Ellen Van Velsor, Cynthia D. McCauley, and Marian N. Ruderman (Eds.), *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development*
- Morgan McCall, Michael M. Lombardo, and Ann M. Morrison, *Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job*
- Morgan McCall, *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*

## Organization Execution

- Ram Charan and Larry Bossidy, *Execution*
- Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling, *The Four Disciplines of Execution*

### EXHIBIT 1. TOPICS AND EXEMPLAR BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY

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organization's culture.*

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communication, policies, and organization design may also be aligned to support leadership change.

#### 5. Tracking

The maxims are true: You get what you inspect and not what you expect; you do what you are rewarded for (and so does everyone else); and you shouldn't reward one thing while hoping for something different. Leaders must measure their behaviors and results in specific ways. Unless desired leadership behaviors and changes are translated into specific actions, quantified, and tracked, they are nice to contemplate but not likely to get done. Effective metrics for leadership behaviors need to be transparent, easy to measure, timely, and tied to consequences. Leadership sustainability can be woven into existing scorecards and even become its own scorecard to ensure that leaders monitor how they are doing.

#### 6. Melioration

*Melioration* (a Latin word meaning "to improve or be resilient") is a new term for a whole complex of actions and attitudes designed to make things better. Leaders meliorate when they improve by learning from mistakes and failures and demonstrate resilience. Change is not linear. We don't often start at point A and end up in a logical and smooth progression at point Z. Most of the time, we try, fail (or succeed), try again, fail again, and so forth. When we learn from each attempt, the outcomes we intend eventually come to pass. Leadership sustainability requires that leaders master the principles of learning: to experiment frequently, to reflect always, to become

resilient, to face failure, to not be calloused to success, and to improvise continually.

#### 7. Emotion

Leaders who sustain change have a personal passion for the changes they need to make. Sustained change is a matter of the heart as well as the head; it needs a strong emotional agenda and not simply an intellectual one, however logical and cogent that may be. Action without passion will not long endure, nor will passion without action. Leaders ensure emotion by drawing on their deeper values and finding meaning in the work they do. Leadership sustainability occurs when leaders not only know but feel what they should do to improve. This passion increases when leaders see their desired changes as part of their personal identities and purpose, when their changes will shape their relationships with others, and when their changes will shift the culture of their work settings.

These are the next phase of our leadership journey.

These seven disciplines spell the mnemonic START ME. We think this is apt because for each of us, sustainability *starts* with *me*. These seven disciplines turn hope into reality. Leaders who apply these disciplines go beyond the *why* and *what* of leadership to reach the *how*. Of course, if leaders lack a strong sense of *why* they should change and *what* they should change to, leadership sustainability does not matter. But once leaders accept the *why* of change and understand the *what*, dealing with *how* will make sure leadership change happens.

We are sure that we have not captured everything that will increase leadership sustainability, but these seven principles should inform both personal efforts to be better leaders and organization investments to build better leadership. When leadership training

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*Change is not linear.*

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occurs, the impact will increase when participants attend to these seven factors as they anticipate how to turn their learning into action. When an aspiring leader receives 360-degree feedback, the personal



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action plan will be more sustainable if it attends to these seven factors. When an organization's leadership development plan is reviewed, executives can increase their confidence that the leadership investments will have payback if they pay attention to these seven principles.

Leaders matter. Leadership matters more. Leadership sustainability matters most.



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