

Fire Trump!

By
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In this time of reality shows, survival of the fittest is heralded as the ultimate success. Be it "Survivor," "The Bachelor" or some knock off, competition is critical to the plot and if you don't beat out those around you, you're the loser. "The Apprentice" has mesmerized people from all walks of life. The now famous "You're fired!" brings glee to those watching as yet another "wannabe" is dismissed. Although most business professionals avoid saying "You're fired!" and often feel like they have somehow failed if they must terminate someone's employment, Trump appears to bask in the delivery of this now famous line so much so that he's attempting to have it trademarked.

As a teacher of organizational effectiveness and an executive coach, I'm concerned that many who watch "The Apprentice" believe that Trump is a model for leadership of a successful organization. Even if he claims that he's only acting, Trump communicates to the world that it's his way or no way. The truth is that the most successful organizations employ techniques much the opposite of what "The Apprentice" portrays as best practices. Trump is a very successful entrepreneur. But when it comes to leadership, at least as demonstrated on "The Apprentice," he comes up short. Let me tell you why.

The best leaders are more concerned with the group or organization's success and much less concerned with being in the limelight. In his research on how companies grow, published in his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins consistently found that the best leaders are humble. When a problem crept up or some shortcoming was discovered, the CEOs of these companies tended to accept responsibility. When something terrific happened, these same CEOs gave credit to the team. Trump stands in real contrast here.

The leaders I have coached, including the CEOs, see themselves as part of a larger whole and report feeling much more fulfilled than their more ego-driven counterparts. The drive to make more and stay "on top," is like an addiction; you can get short-term relief, but not long term satisfaction. It's not about survival of the fittest, it's about building something bigger than oneself. Ultimately, the more "emotionally intelligent" a leader is, the more productive and high performing their teams and organization become.

Being emotionally intelligent includes self-awareness, managing your emotions effectively, motivation, empathy, reading other people's feelings accurately, and social skills like teamwork, leadership, and managing relationships. When we are aware of these aspects of ourselves, we can sense them in others and react to them appropriately. If we aren't aware of our own emotions and their impact, we can't be aware of what others may be experiencing either. This puts us at a serious disadvantage in relating with others at work, at home, and in friendships. The self-centered "get it done no matter how you do it" attitude of "The Apprentice" illustrates and reinforces emotionally unintelligent behavior.

Donald Trump and "The Apprentice" also convey lots of urgency. Of course, a great deal of the entertainment value is that both the viewers and the candidates respond viscerally to the challenges posed. Organizations that adapt to change the best act with urgency and are able to stimulate it at the gut level as well. However, the kind of urgency, and how it gets communicated, is different. It's not about competing with your peers to win out over them or an autocratic approach that threatens people who don't "get on board." Developing a sense of urgency can be innovative – it's something that gets employees out of their "comfort zone" and stimulates positive action. For example, in one organization where the customer service group didn't seem to be hearing their customers enough, a creative leader interviewed and, with permission, videotaped several angry customers. When other managers and employees viewed their customers agitated and upset about service, they developed a gut level response that "we have to do something." The team acted with urgency and made critical concerns a top priority. Misuse of urgency as a tool can drive an organization into the ground, while making the critical urgent and reinforcing teamwork can take a company to the next level of growth.

Exceptional leaders and high performing organizations also have a clear and compelling picture of where the organization is going. It's not about being the wealthiest, most recognized, or the one on top. For many these are only by-products of success. The best run companies have an inspiring vision that engages most employees. Often the company's vision for the future is a collective dream that has been built through dialogue across the organization and with other stakeholders like customers. A vision is an attractive and realistic view of the future that inspires people and the organization to reach "stretch goals." How the leadership communicates the vision and how they involve employees in making the vision reality are all factors in whether or not a company has a true direction. If Trump does this, it is hidden from the cameras. His vision appears to be "take the challenge and you might be the next me."

One's values as a leader impact the selection of a vision because values influence the questions one asks about possible directions. Values guide which possible visions to consider, what criteria is needed to adopt the vision, and what measures of success should be used to judge whether the organization is moving toward its vision. An organization's values help determine hiring practices, performance appraisal, and marketplace conduct. Neither Trump nor his staff verbally expresses any specific values outside of competence in "winning." The feedback given to deselect "Apprentice" candidates is often personality driven, something that would get you in legal trouble in the real world. An example of a value might be "excellence in all we do." Values should embody what truly matters to an organization and be manifested in its performance and the ways in which it satisfies its responsibilities to key stakeholders – employees, customers, investors, and the rest of society. "What do we stand for?" and "What are the principles that have made us special and successful?" are good questions to consider in the development of values. "The Apprentice" doesn't focus on the importance of values. It frequently shows how almost any value should be compromised for fame and fortune. (Omarasa)

Trump outlines challenges that deal with handling aspects of his business, such as running golf tournaments or fundraisers that support his investments. The connection that gets made for the wannabe apprentices is that individual performance will lead to individual success and a new role in the company. In the real world, this approach of short term gain for the individual versus positive long term performance by the team has spawned many of the ethics violations and scandals in the news today like Enron, Tyco and the now disbanded Arthur Andersen. Successful leaders understand the power of high performing teams. They know how to coach and mentor others – something painfully missing from “The Apprentice.”

Gallup and other research groups have shown that the most powerful reinforcement in an employee’s environment is their boss. For better or worse, it’s the direct supervisor that is the biggest factor in whether someone goes or stays or whether or not plans get implemented. Companies invest millions in various training and development activities to increase organizational effectiveness, yet it’s the ability of supervisors to coach and mentor that usually makes the long-term difference.

Good business coaching takes a back seat to criticizing and yelling in “The Apprentice.” As “teams” of hopefuls are pulled together for “projects,” no points are given to the appointed “manager” for his or her coaching abilities. Hence, no emphasis is placed upon these skills....In the real world, the best coaches are specific about the situation or skill area that needs to be addressed. They ask good questions to better understand where the coachee is coming from and then develop with him or her a plan to help the coachee reach agreed upon results. Trump ought to at least consider providing off camera coaching support to those who “get fired.”

Based on my experience in working with leaders and leadership teams, setting the right direction and acting on it with focus is the biggest challenge that organizations face. Often, we use expressions like “getting on the same page,” “being in synch” or “having all the oars in the water” as ways of describing organizational alignment. Alignment is about getting all the beliefs, values, behaviors, systems and goals of an organization integrated so that they support the organization’s strategy and its vision for the future. This takes teamwork, not a winner takes all mentality communicated in The Apprentice. One of the most effective examples of this is Nissan.

I participated on a project team to help Nissan align with its newly defined brand. For simplicity sake, brand can be defined as the promise an organization makes its customers. Over time, if an organization is living its brand, targeted customers will come back again and again. For years, Nissan was making cars equivalent to Toyota’s that sold for less and worse, Nissan would give deep discounts that compromised its brand even more. It’s hard to build customer loyalty by being the cheapest in your class. Someone will always come in at a lower price and there goes your customer.

Soon after Carlos Ghosen became CEO of Nissan, he decided that profitability, creating a strong brand and aligning the organization so that it “lived its brand” would be top priorities. The initiative started with a clear strategy, to increase perceived value per car and to build a strong brand that appealed to

a specifically defined market. Setting expectations and linking them to overall organizational performance are key ingredients in Nissan's success mix. Nissan has reinvented itself because of its commitment to align the organization with the new direction and to address inconsistencies across all parts of the organization so that it operates with unified focus. Teamwork and leaving your ego at the door has everything to do with organizational alignment. This lesson can't be learned in survival driven approaches that glorify the individual.

The Apprentice can amuse and engage. It teaches little about how to really be successful as a leader or as an organization.