

Lecture Text

Professor Joseph L. Bower

Leadership is a Choice: The General Manager in the Middle

(edited for clarity)

Introduction

I just wanted to offer you some thoughts based upon what we had been doing, before we start looking at upper levels in the organization. And what's really interesting—we use titles to describe the jobs that people have, right? Director and things like that. And the word we almost never use in a title is leader. So the most valued role and the most valued function is leader. But we talk instead about general managers. Now, general managers, well, we've seen, it's pretty obvious, there are two types. There are corporate bosses that have direct functional reports, and those of course are general managers. There are also corporate bosses with divisional or subsidiary general managers reporting to them. We call them the same thing.

And we call general managers with bosses general managers in the middle. And that's how we build large diversified multinational companies; we use that building block. Now, that's lots of you. You are now or will soon run one of those building blocks. And it sits, as we've seen, right at the interface between the corporation and the operating units, and I think we've seen how complicated that job can get.

So the title is general manager, but I think we can begin to see what this really needs is leaders. So what I want to do is talk about general managers in the middle, and share what we know about them as leaders, because actually we've been paying some time. So the organization is straightforward: What's the job? How do you learn the job? Doing the job. Special challenges. And then some of the personal qualities of the general manager in the middle.

The General Manager Plays Three Roles

Now, going back to day one, we've been saying that general managers have to play three roles. You have to be a strategist, you have to be able to build the organization, but you also have to perform. It's a day in and day out job.

Strategist

Now, let's think about strategists. What is he, what's the role? When you're strategizing, notice that it's a process. We saw that today. It's a sequence of decisions, partly in response to opportunities that are generated from within. Sometimes you don't like the opportunity, but the opportunities come from within, sometimes because the people above you demand—so you've got to do something—and partly because things happen in the market.

I think what we can see is when you're managing that process it takes patience. Things don't always happen in the sequence that you want or at the speed that you want. And it takes persistence, because if you're going to try and get something, sometimes you have to wait it out.

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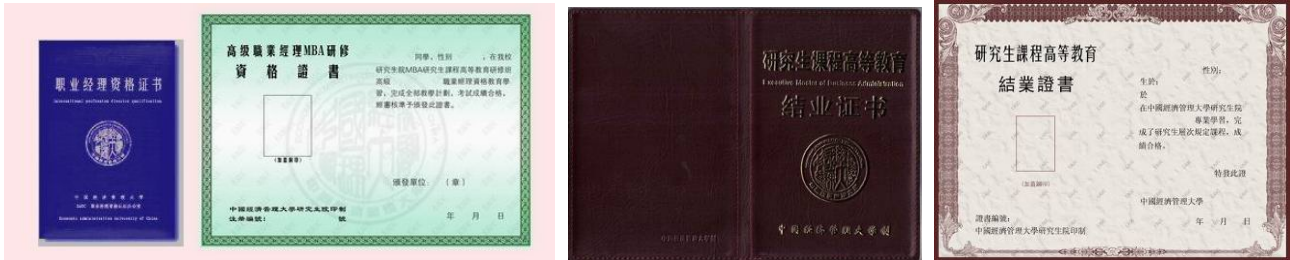
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But strategy also involves content, right? It's economic and technical, it has to do with ideas and concepts, and it has to do with timing. And it has to do with judgment because you're calibrating inputs. Remember, strategy is about the future. And if you're talking about the future, then you're not talking about facts; you're talking about judgments—with exceptions. You can generally predict. If you know what the snow was in the Himalayas, you can know what the flood is going to be in the Ganges. But that's not most of what we have to deal with.

We've also used that word passion. If you're going to be communicating and getting people to buy into strategy, it's a question of passion because you have to persuade people about ideas.

Organization builder

Now, building organizations, part of that is simplifying. We're trying to find the tasks. We assign them to people. Then we try and integrate, and we try and establish and evaluate process, systems, procedures.

But if we're building an organization, we also have to give it energy. And we also have to get people who are the right people, and motivate them.

Managing the incentives. There are formal incentives, informal incentives, and then establishing and reinforcing the norms, all involved in organization. So, in one sense, it's design; in the other, it's making it work.

Performer

Performing. Notice, you're managing multiple constituencies and relationships. Part of that is communicating, inspiring people; part of it is controlling, holding them accountable. Part of it is getting them committed, managing that balance—getting the best of both worlds. Part of performing is getting results, and that means winning key battles, managing when you intervene; operating; innovating; all of the above.

Setting priorities among the roles

Now, how do we set priorities among them? And you could see, in our discussions, that that's been important to us. Some of you have been arguing on the basis of strategy, some on the basis of organization, some on the basis of people. How do you create strong, competitive advantage; sustain it? And it's all in execution, right? It's not the brilliance, it's just executing. Executing. It's track record. That's your credibility. Credibility is your money in the bank. That's what you can invest.

Now, if you're a general manager in the middle, it's an infinite learning curve. I think we've seen, every day there's stuff to learn. Everything seems relevant, and that's exciting. This is one of the most difficult general manager jobs. In some ways it's harder to be the general manager in the middle than to be the top because you have to manage not just down, but across, out, and up. And you want to have fun, because if you don't have fun, it's not worth the work. It's a ton of work. You're doing it all the time.

Learning the Job

Now, learning the job. What does your boss say when you get a job, right? What does the boss say about the job? Very general, right? Usually the boss doesn't tell you a great deal. "Congratulations." Why don't they tell you more? Hmm? They don't

really know. What do they expect from you? They say, "A difficult but achievable goal," right? It means that they have no idea how to do the job. And they hope that they've made a good choice in picking you because you're going to do it. But that has real implications. You get to define your job. That's a big deal.

How much room do you have?

How much room do you have, then, if you're defining your job? Usually much more than you think—tremendous autonomy. And it means when you define your job you can enlarge your job. You can start small and then you can change it. You can turn problems into opportunities. You can really think about doing impossible things. A lot of the cases we've talked about, when we've looked at general managers in the middle, the things that they were doing were not in their job description. They decided to do it.

So you can be aggressive and take risks, and you can adapt, and improvise, and be opportunistic, all of those. And if you think about it, you're providing, your job in some sense is providing impetus for good ideas that other people have.

Which must-win battles to fight

Now, part of learning the job is figuring out which battles you have to fight and which battles you don't. It's really interesting. You don't have to fight your predecessor's battles. You come into a job and you'll learn that we have very difficult relations with some other group. You don't have to have difficult relations unless you want to. You can choose. Obviously, you want to pick the easy battles first. You also want to take on battles that make a real difference. You don't want to fight battles if they're not making a difference. And then you have to win them because that's key to your credibility and your power. If you don't win your battles, it's a problem. If you think about the cases we've discussed this morning, power shifted as the battles worked.

Diagnosing the territory

Now, how do you diagnose the territory? It's really a problem if you do not know your markets or your business, the industry, the technical aspects. But you've got to do it, so you have to do it slowly. You also have to understand what you inherited, what was going on. That doesn't mean you have to do it.

So you also want to know in effect, then, what is the history, what did your predecessor do, what is the setting, who is loyal to whom? Now, how much do you do before you get the job? How much due diligence? As much as you can.

But I think you may also, if you can't do much ahead of time, then you may have to do it after you take on the job. A lot of the time you have to work on the job. Some companies today talk about "on-boarding," and they literally won't let you do the job until you've gone through the process of on-boarding. But, as a newcomer, balancing diagnosis and decisions is really important. One of the real issues is if you're taking a lot of decisions, it can block thinking.

So, discovery then consists of seeing what everyone's seeing. That's what happens when you come in and you're told what's going on. But can you think what nobody's thought?

Mapping relationships

Now, another part of it is just mapping the relationships, and we've done a lot of that. So, you want to be a loyal supporter then. You want to be a credible general manager to the outside world, your peers want to think of you as cooperative, and your subordinates want to think of you as decisive. And you want to appear as a consistent person while you're doing all those different things.

So, which are the important relationships? All of them, right. How much time do you give to each? Well, it's something to think about. I mean one of the most important things I hope you get out of this program is that there is an enormous amount to do, and thinking about how you want to use your time is critical.

Which are you going to manage? Which challenges? How? How are you going to manage it? How are you going to resolve the contradictions? This morning we were talking about contradictions.

Mapping the multiple demands

There are multiple demands on you, and they are contradictory. So how do you get everyone on one page? One of the real risks you have is being considered a chameleon: "He'll say/she'll say just whatever we want." And that's terrible because then you have no credibility.

So, one of the challenges is to see if you can frame issues so that you can say the same thing to everyone. Can you frame it? Can you find a way of deciding what the issue is so that it's what you want? My favorite example of framing is Ronald Reagan, the past president of the United States. And there was a moment in time when the aircraft controllers in the United States, the people in the towers who control the flights, realized that their working conditions were appalling, and it was getting very, very unsafe, and they went on strike.

Now, you would've thought that there was nothing more sympathetic than that. And Ronald Reagan looked at it for a minute and somehow or other he was able to turn it into an issue of an illegal strike. And everybody agreed that it was a bad thing to have illegal strikes, and that was the end of the strike. And he framed it one way and he won.

Another challenge is how to link and leverage arguments. Part of that is trying to figure out what people—what their objective is, not what their position is. Because, if you understand what their objective is, sometimes you can give them what they want without giving them their position. So, in effect, trying to go for the best of both worlds—get win, win.

Understanding the strategic process

Now, another mapping challenge is understanding the process. Part of that is relative power. Everybody has jobs. Your subordinates have jobs. Now, some are more important than others. The direction in which your organization is moving has a great deal to do with who has more influence.

So you want to see strategy in terms of evolving capabilities in relationships with people, not just words on paper. And then you try and manage to stretch people, stretch the organization, but not break it. We haven't talked, I think, about

companies that have broken themselves, but we know that it's been done. What about doing the job? We know bosses will delegate, and the wonderful thing about this job in the middle is it usually stops with you.

Doing the Job

We can see that the job is constantly translating financial abstractions into operating language. So part of that issue is trying to keep things simple. That's the value of back of the envelope. It's a lot easier to translate what's on the back of an envelope. We have to be bilingual. When we're talking as we manage down, we're usually using a different language than when we're talking, managing up.

We're managing the process and we want to have a goal in mind. And part of that—you know, we talk about getting out of the box—part of that really means thinking about how to manage the contradictions so that you can devise new ways of getting people to do what you need. And then finally learn by the case method.

What we teach is how we teach. You've got to gather data by doing, measuring, and correcting. And part of that is, for sure, ready, fire, aim. But that's how we learn. You take a preliminary shot, and see, and then you learn.

Now, you have limited power, so that means establishing trust and credibility; earning your way. You've got to make sure that the early steps are successful. Now, how do you do that? Partly, you have to be really helpful to your subordinates. How can you be helpful to your subordinates if you don't have a network outside your organization that might help you? So you want to build a network with many constituencies, and you don't want to get typecast. You generally want to have a broad agenda when you relate to people outside your organization, and many kinds of arguments. Otherwise each time you show up, they know what's coming: You want a favor.

So you're trying to frame your arguments quite carefully in order to mobilize resources and allies. That takes thought. Thought takes time. You have to get your calendar under control.

And then, finally, we talked about fun today. But it's a mission, excitement. People have to get up in the morning and come to work and be excited. That's part of your job.

People skills

So that takes people skills. You want to be a two-legged general manager. What do I mean by that? You want to be able to be pretty good at the substance but also know how to do things. You want to be able to be numbers driven. You have to have the facts but, also, you want to be able to relate to people in a human way, and that's hard. Most of us are good at one or the other. So you have to develop being good at both.

How often do you see people? You probably need to manage that. What do you say when things are new, and people are afraid and uncertain? How do you inspire confidence? Anticipating is at the heart of your work. It's figuring out how people are going to react.

And you can't inspire confidence unless you're consistent. And what we see is, boy, to the extent that you can afford it, you want to recruit the best people you can. Finally, you get what you ask for. I think we've seen a lot of that. If you don't ask for good performance you probably won't get it.

Creating a winning-team spirit

And then the winning team. So we want to establish a great work environment that's informal. Motivate with symbols and rewards, not just money. You want to talk but you better be sure you're walking the talk. You have to model the behavior that you're asking people to produce for you.

Now, nothing succeeds like success, right? And in this very uncertain world, that means you better manage expectations. You want to make sure that what you anticipate you're going to achieve is what your goal is, and that takes some doing.

Special Challenges

Now, special challenges ought to be very, very clear. Time is limited. You have only so much time in the day, and I've just listed hundreds of things to think about. So, if you're not going to be overwhelmed, don't overcommit. That means you have to be explicit about it, and you want to triage your involvements. Triage comes from the battlefield, where those who can walk to the hospital, you let them sit for awhile. And those who are going to die, you may let them die, anyway, and work with the ones in the middle, where intervention is the most important, where your intervention is going to have the biggest impact. Same thing as a manager. There are some things you can't help at all. You probably don't make them a priority. You want to make sure that you're using time where it has the most impact.

What's important to your track record? If track record is very important, you probably want to be investing in those things that are going to influence your track record. You want to be as involved as you can up, and out, and across, because that's how you can help your team. If you've got your team working reasonably well, you're not going to help them if you can't deliver things that are new—ideas, resources—and you get those from outside your organization.

That leaves the question: how much time with your team? Probably it evolves, as the team grows and becomes more competent, but I think less than is our instinct. Our instinct is to spend time with our team, partly because it's fun. It's an easier role to play, since we're the boss. And, finally, you have to balance the three roles: strategist, building an organization, and perform. It's a very hard job.

Managing up

Now, let's talk about managing up. How much help can your boss provide you? The interesting question is how much can you do for your boss? If you can do things for your boss, you may find it a lot easier to get your boss's time and attention, so that the boss will help you. I mean, the boss has a hard problem, too. When do you ask for help? Do you want to share information or do you want to share the decision? They're not the same thing. Generally we say, ask for forgiveness, not for permission.

It's tough because you've got dual loyalties. You're loyal to your local situation; you're loyal to the global corporation. You're loyal to your business; you're loyal to the corporation. You've got to be loyal to both.

Now, in order to do that, in order to everything above it, you have to really understand the corporate picture. And we've seen that the corporate picture is likely to be really different from what your perspective is. And even if nobody is asking you to, it helps you to do your job if you understand the company and where it's headed.

A lot of this is can you deal principal to principal? Do you think of yourself as the manager of a business? You're managing a business. You're going to go talk to someone else who's managing a business. You've got to be careful of language. You don't want to say, "It's mine," because that is liable to create some problems. But I think you want to think of yourself as a serious person.

Managing yourself

Okay. There is then the challenge of managing yourself, as you do this very, very difficult job. So how good are your antennae? Can you pick up what's going on? Do you have a mirror? How are you getting feedback? Are there people who help you, and say, "I don't know what you thought about that meeting, but that was terrible"? Or do you understand how you are perceived? We've talked about managers that had a very positive view of themselves, and didn't. Do you know your own weaknesses? Are you managing your development? Are you thinking about not just what I do well, but what I don't do—I'm not good with numbers, or I'm not very good at persuading people. What are you doing about it?

Ambition is sometimes thought to be inappropriate, but that's really the engine. Why do we put up with all of this? It's hard work, what we're talking about, and it must be, because we're trying to achieve something. You can't build your self-confidence unless you try. Just try. Just do it—you know, the Nike ad.

The Complete General Manager

So, the complete general manager, right? Clear head, big heart, strong stomach, thick skin. Two-legged, so that you can balance the hard and the soft, and the what and the how; and you have the ability to convince, persuade, and negotiate, and know when to do it; have a sense of timing, and know how to do it; a sense of diplomacy.

You want to be at ease. The world is imperfect. The world is full of contradictions. The world is full of wonderful people who are doing the damndest things. You have to enjoy it. And it's a very unstructured, complicated, ill-defined world that we're dealing with. You have to be able to tolerate ambiguity, and make sense of conflicting data.

You have to have the skill to just choose from several answers. There isn't a correct answer. You've got decide which answer you want and you're willing to live with. We've seen that phrase many times. You want to desire to make a difference. Good general managers are opportunistic. They're self-starters. They just thrive on getting things done. There's a bias to action, some sense of urgency; not waiting and analyzing forever; lots of energy.

That goes with the job. You have to want to lead. You have to do it. Then you have to be interdependent, because a lot of the time you're not getting results. You have to keep learning. You have to be able to keep learning. You have to see this job as an opportunity to develop yourself; to grow, and do wonderful things.

You have to have the self-confidence to deal with stress. It's awful some of the time, but you just have to hang in. And you may not have any reinforcement for long periods of time. So that's why you have to be interdependent. You just have to understand that that's what you're trying to do, and you'll get there. So go for it. It's really a choice.

Leadership is a choice. Nobody's telling you to do all these things. You're managing it yourself.