

Leadership Barometer 174 Leadership Foundation **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



Just as every building needs a firm foundation, every organization needs a Leadership Foundation. No construction company would think of building any size building without first providing a suitable foundation. If they eliminated that step, the building would not stand for long.

Organizations need a Leadership Foundation

For an organization, it is imperative that the key leaders construct a leadership foundation so they can be successful. I will describe my interpretation of the elements of the foundation and tell why each one is critical. I will also provide some examples from personal experience.

The foundation for a building has many interrelated parts. Likewise, a leadership foundation has different parts that must work together.

Start with values

The values provide the floor of the foundation. All activities and decisions must be consistent with the values, or they will damage the organization. The values must be owned by the entire organization. Make sure to have wide participation in creating the values.

I believe it is best to have a “handful” of values. A long shopping list of nice things to have may look impressive, but it is hard for people to remember. For values to provide the proper centering, they must be in play at all times.

Aim for four to six strong values. If they spell out an acronym, that is helpful for people. For example, in my own organization, the values spell out the word “LIGHT.” The words are Loyalty, Integrity, Generosity, Honesty, and Trust. Having an acronym that has meaning really helps with memory recall.

Leaders need to emphasize that “we always follow our values, especially when it is difficult or expensive.” That attitude is what gives the values their power.

Add your purpose

The purpose tells everyone in the organization why they are doing the work. Purpose is often confused with mission. These two concepts are different. Here is a classic example to illustrate the difference. For a quarry, the mission might be to cut rock into slabs. The purpose could be to build a cathedral.

I used to work at Kodak. Our mission was to make photographic film, but our purpose was to help people preserve memories.

Solidify the mission

The mission statement tells everyone in the organization what we are trying to accomplish. Keep the mission short and memorable for maximum effect. For example, the GE Mission statement of “We bring good things to life” is an excellent one.

Don't include a lot of management jargon in the mission statement. For example, here is an actual mission statement for a company. Can you guess what the company is?

To establish beneficial business relationships with diverse suppliers who share our commitment to customer service, quality and competitive pricing

Finally, create a vision

The vision tells everyone where we are going. This statement is the most powerful part of the foundation because it points people in the right direction. The vision is a positive statement of what we are trying to become. Many leaders think a vision statement should be achievable or people will become discouraged. Personally, I believe an aspirational vision statement is stronger because it provides reach.

For example, the FedEx vision, “Absolutely positively overnight” is a strong vision statement. It is not possible to achieve 100% of the time due to natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or pandemics. That does not make it a weak vision statement.

Conclusion

Once you have those four elements, you have a solid platform and can start building walls with confidence. You can build your strategic plan based on this strong leadership foundation.

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