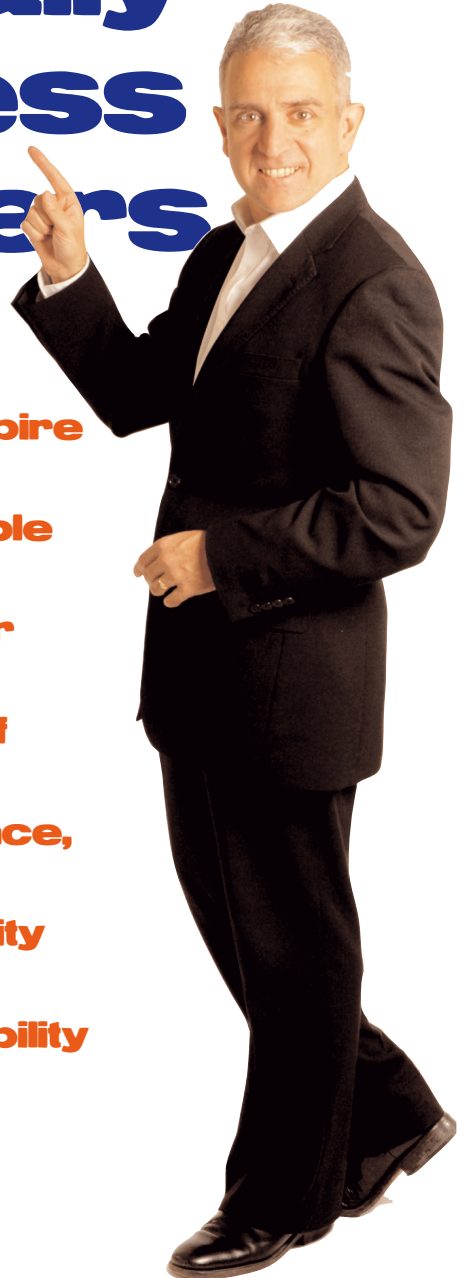


The Seven Failings of Really Useless Leaders



**How to inspire
your people
to higher
levels of
performance,
productivity
and profitability**

Jacqueline Moore & Steven Sonsino

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**THE
SEVEN
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OF
REALLY
USELESS
LEADERS**

*How to Inspire Your People to Higher Levels of
Performance, Productivity and Profitability*

**Jacqueline Moore
& Steven Sonsino**

**MSL PUBLISHING
LONDON**

This book is dedicated to the unsung senior, junior and middle managers we work with on a daily basis. Without your frustrations, your insights and your experience, this book would not have been written.

You challenged us to make leadership skills practical and tangible. If we've been successful in this, we challenge you now to have the courage to lead in a different, more authentic way.

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WRITING A BOOK MAY appear to be a solitary endeavour, but the reality is that if you want a book to be read by thousands or hopefully tens of thousands of people, you need to have an entire team on your side.

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THE FIRST FAILING

Really Useless Leaders Kill Explanation

How Really Useless Leaders kill productivity by ‘mushroom management’ and the simple things you can do to use communication to increase business performance

IT WAS A HARD STORY to tell to the interviewer. Mike, a long-time government official, was hunting for words, pausing, thinking aloud. ‘The lack of information . . . it definitely makes your job difficult... And if you can’t get that self-satisfaction of doing a job, I would think it would be very easy to leave.’ Another government worker, Jody, felt the same, though she had only been in the agency a few years. ‘The lack of knowledge can become very frustrating and may be disappointing to the point where you don’t feel you can achieve any more than what you’ve achieved... and, therefore, it will affect your wanting to leave.’

These comments – from managers in a large US government agency³ – are typical of the things people say about ‘mushroom management’ – the science and art of keeping your people in the dark. And the downside – the impact on morale and retention – is very real.

Now, occasionally managers deliberately keep their people in the dark – perhaps because they feel that the subject under discussion is sensitive. Something like a major relocation or a takeover inevitably brings a degree of secrecy to the proceedings. But sometimes it's just forgetfulness.

Most people we've spoken to have experienced the dreaded executive board 'offsite'. The management team leaves the comfort of HQ for the even greater comfort of an 'offsite' meeting. They're staying at a particularly fancy hotel, occasionally in a different (usually warmer) climate, facilitated by some consultant or business school professor parachuted in for the day. He or she is helping the executive board to analyse all the competitors and to develop a powerful 'knock 'em dead' strategy. After a couple of days of scrawling on flip charts, and the odd round of golf, the senior executive team emerges from the hotel, brandishing pages and pages of notes – their new goals and targets for the business, now miraculously honed into a coherent 'strategy'. (Goals and targets do not a strategy make, but that's a story for another time.)

'That's the strategy,' says the board to their staff. 'Now go for it!' And that's it. No explanation beyond the exhortation to 'Just do it!'. Why don't they explain more of what they want? Why don't they answer the questions their people raise?

Well, many managers seem to assume that:

- everyone 'gets' what our business is about or for
- everyone will 'get' the new strategy easily
- everyone has *already* 'got' it, they're just stalling now
- and everyone will do what we say because we're boss.

It's amazing how quickly managers forget, isn't it? They forget that it took them days of extensive discussion, lobbying and planning to reach their new strategy. But the folks back at the

ranch don't have that luxury of time. 'Just do it!' says the boss.

By the way, we're not talking about just a few of the staff who don't understand. Robert Kaplan and David Norton, the Harvard professors who developed the balanced scorecard back in 1996, suggest that only one in five of our people get or understand company strategy as described by senior managers⁴. The important thing to realise, though, is that it isn't that our people are NOT capable of understanding it. The point is that we as the senior executive team don't do a good enough job of explaining the strategy.

And you have probably already experienced what happens next. Yes, the senior executive team is *surprised* that people don't welcome the new strategy with open arms and rush with great enthusiasm to implement it. Because if management realises one thing, it's that if implementation stalls then performance falls.

How 'not explaining' hits your bottom line

Let's consider the direct impact of not explaining. If we take it as read that your new business strategy will deliver greater profitability or reduce your costs, then you need everyone to do things that will deliver greater profitability or greater cost savings. That's a given, right? But if your people just don't understand why you're asking them to go for growth, or why even tougher cost savings matter, then they are unlikely to change what they are already doing. It's incredibly difficult to change the status quo.

And if people won't change what they're doing, you just won't get improved profitability or reduced costs. It won't happen. If this were a game of baseball, that would be strike one.

Here's another reason productivity and profitability get hit – because when you don't explain, your people can't get the information they need to do their jobs properly.

Remember Jody at the start of this chapter? ‘The lack of information... it definitely makes your job difficult,’ she said. What’s the payoff for Jody and people like her? ‘If you can’t get that self-satisfaction of doing a job, I would think it would be very easy to leave,’ she said. So that’s the price you pay for forgetting the importance of explaining. And when people leave, you’re left with a mess to sort out, new people to find and hire, and inexperienced people to bring up to speed.

But it isn’t just the direct impact of not explaining that kills productivity, it’s also how our people feel about how we treat them when we don’t explain. Let’s look at some of the things Really Useless Leaders say when their people ask them to explain.

1) *‘It’s obvious’, ‘If you have to ask you don’t know’ and ‘Don’t worry your little head about that’.*

This mean-spirited point scoring simply programmes people never to ask you for anything ever again.

2) *‘The manager’s right to manage’ and ‘Just do as I say’*

The know-it-all or control freak’s charter simply programmes people to wait to be told what to do.

3) *‘You’re a stick in the mud’ and ‘Change is a constant’*

Most people are not afraid or unwilling to change. They just need to see the purpose or where a project fits into the overall picture. But phrases like this create a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, using this phrase has a tendency to create people who *are* sticks in the mud.

Rudeness and disrespect from managers creates anger, resentment and unwillingness in our people. Strike two for the First Failing of Really Useless Leaders.

But there is more and worse still to come.

How to kill strategic alignment

Perhaps more worrisome still about managers who don't explain is the impact they have on what's become known as alignment - the marrying of people's personal goals with the company goals. If what we really need to do as managers is to get everyone pulling the same way, then we should be explaining the vision and mission of our business in as many different ways as possible. If we can do this, then everyone will pull in the same direction, building on all the activities of the business, creating a business where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In other words, because Pete in engineering knows what the main goal of the business is, he can help Sarah in marketing along the way. And Sarah in marketing can see what else might be helpful for Andrew in human resources. Explaining the overall goals increases the innovation and initiative that exist right across the business.

In essence, then, when we explain what the business vision is, all of our people have a sense of purpose which allows them to add value to everyone's projects. This adds huge value for the business overall. And there's an added benefit. Because if we all know the direction business is heading in, then there is automatically a degree of buy-in or commitment to the goals.

But if we choose NOT to explain, NOT to communicate, then commitment gets undermined in countless little ways, with people chip, chip, chipping away at the strategy and purpose. Not in any way you'd really notice, and definitely not in any way you can easily correct. But the results are dramatic. Having a strategy in the hands of an unaligned workforce is like having a really old car that's getting a little older every day. All the different parts are gradually going wrong and failing, but the car is held together by the layer of rust. You don't know if the car will get through the

next service, but there's no one big thing you can fix. There is nothing major that's wrong with it. So strike three is the major impact not explaining has on business alignment.

How to explain

There are dozens of tactics and strategies for communicating with your people, but we'll just cover four of the ones that we use regularly and that we share with our clients in our workshops. They are tactics and strategies that have worked for years so we can recommend them wholeheartedly because they work.

The tactics are these:

- The reason why
- 21st century delegation
- The decision-making continuum
- The team briefing cascade

1) *The reason why*

John Patterson founded the National Cash Register company (NCR) in 1884. He was fanatical and autocratic, but he knew one or two things about selling. He trained his sales executives to explain to buyers *why* they needed his machines and he knew how to use explanations to differentiate his more expensive machines from those offered by the competitors.

Patterson also discovered a fascinating side effect of giving his people an arsenal of meaningful sales arguments. Not only did his sales executives sell more products than many others in the industry, they were also more motivated because they knew how to communicate more effectively with their clients. That motivation led to even greater success.⁵

So give your people a clear and simple 'reason why'. Make

sure the reason why is focused on future benefits, and can be answered ‘in order to...’. This will be focused on the benefits of the project. If the answer to your reason why is ‘because of’, is it usually less valuable to you, unless you’re explaining why you need to comply with legislation. If you have children you’ll recognise that ‘do this just because’ doesn’t work very well.

Another aspect of ‘the reason why’ is make sure you have answered the question ‘what’s in it for me’ (WIIFM) for your people. They don’t want to know the reason why they must comply, they want to know what’s in it for them.

**Inspirational Leadership
Blueprint Principle**

Give people a reason why

**And remember that why means ‘in order to’,
rather than ‘just because’**

What makes a good reason why? Give your people technical information showing why this or that equipment is best, fastest, or cheapest and how it will beat the competition hollow. Give them reasons why something will win market share. Give them reasons why we have to move now (‘there’s a deadline’, or ‘we’ll miss out if we don’t do it soon’).

Whatever reasons you give people, do give people reasons why. A good reason why becomes a virus that works for you, spreading explanation through the company, even when you’re not in the conversation.

In summary, a good reason why does three things:

- a) gives a clear purpose
- b) can be used to pass on to others
- c) buys commitment ('even though I don't agree I can see why they want to...')

2) 21st century delegation

We can use the moment we delegate tasks as a moment to explain why. Here's how it can work. In the diagram below you'll see that there are two people involved. The circle on the left represents you, the manager, and the circle on the right represents your employee, or the team you're delegating to.

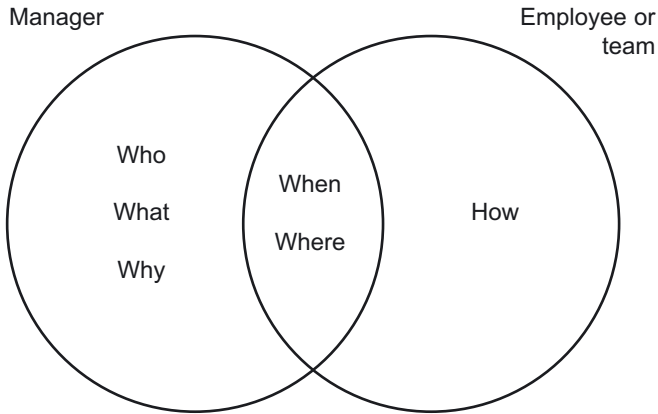


Figure 1: 21st century delegation - who decides what?

In the circle on the left are the things that you the manager should explain, in the overlap between the two circles are the things you negotiate with the employee or team you're delegating to.

In the circle on the right - that's the circle that your employee or your team has responsibility for.

So looking again at the circles, you have responsibility for

kickstarting the briefing and basically this boils down to clarifying three things:

- 1) **who** you want to tackle the project
- 2) **what** the project is
- 3) and **why** the topic is important

The circle on the right represents your employee and we'll look at the contents of that circle in a moment.

But in the overlap with your employee you can see two things that need to be negotiated between you. In essence, these are the terms of reference for the project:

- 4) **when** will the project be completed
- 5) **where** will the project take place

Finally, there's something you should leave entirely to your people to figure out. You should leave them to choose precisely **how** they undertake the project. Your people are smarter than you are when it comes to the nitty gritty of their daily roles. They are best placed to decide how to carry something out.

**Inspirational Leadership
Blueprint Principle**

**Explain why
but let people choose how**

Giving your people this degree of autonomy – the ability to decide how to do something – goes a long way to winning their

commitment and enthusiasm for the project. Spelling out exactly how they should do something, as well as what and why, will severely reduce their performance on the project. We'll say more about this in Chapter 4 on the Fourth Failing of Really Useless Leaders.

3) *The decision-making continuum*

You know that if you can increase the amount of participation people have in the decision making process, the more they will be committed to the decision you jointly reach. Unfortunately some managers see involving people in the decision making process as tantamount to giving away their rights to manage. 'Participation in decision making?' one manager said to us. 'No, thanks – management by consensus never works. It's like communism.'

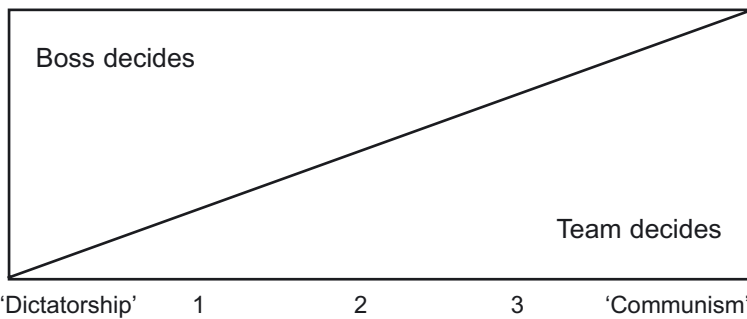


Figure 2: the decision-making continuum - who decides?

But you can see participation in decision making as much more than black or white, on or off. We suggest you see decision making as a continuum.

If the box above represents the continuum of decision making, then at the extreme left of the box is the point where you, the boss, make all the decisions for the team. At the extreme right

is the point where the team makes all the decisions. But in between are a whole host of possible decisions.

About a quarter of the way along from left to right (at point 1 on the box, for example) you might say this:

‘Folks, I’ve pretty much made up my mind on this point, but if you can help me explore some additional possibilities then it will help me make a better decision for the business.’

About halfway along (at point 2) you might say something like this:

‘I have some views on how we might do this, but I really need your involvement to explore all the possibilities. I’ll work with you and we’ll come up with something we all agree works well. But I’ll make the final call on this.’

About three quarters of the way from left to right (at point 3) you might say:

‘I have no feelings on this one way or the other – I’ll support whatever you want to do.’

This almost grants full autonomy to the team, but not quite. And if you don’t use the continuum to explain your position, **whenever** you canvass the views of your people they will **always** assume you are giving them total autonomy to decide what to do.

Inspirational Leadership

Blueprint Principle

**Invite participation but spell out
who is the decision maker**

4) The team briefing cascade

Team briefing is a powerful method of cascading information up

and down the levels of any company. It was first developed by the Industrial Society (now the Work Foundation) more than 40 years ago, but probably hasn't been used as extensively as it could be. This is a great shame and is probably because managers are not as skilled in facilitating meetings as they could be.

Now, each briefing includes a mixture of head office and local issues, but the point of the briefing is not so much in the information it cascades, but in how the information is shared. The cascade makes sure, first of all, that staff at all levels receive the information that is relevant to them and that, secondly, they can question senior managers 'at the point of sale', as it were. Now, team briefing is not meant to replace the normal and essential day-to-day communications between managers and their staff, but we believe the process works particularly well because it is **face-to-face**, which is a missing ingredient in all electronic forms of communication.

How the process works is that every month the CEO or the board of directors agree a core brief, covering financial and statistical performance, company policy, business direction and market conditions among other things. But not everything needs to be covered in every briefing. This is then shared in an open face-to-face meeting with the next level of managers.

Now what makes this different from something that could be blasted to everyone by email is that open questions are encouraged and the forum is an opportunity to discuss and explore the elements in the briefing. Then the managers from the board down add their local interpretation and explanation to the core brief before passing the items on to the next level, with the same open questions policy in force.

There are a couple of important points to note. First, the team briefings should be face-to-face. Second, they should take

place as soon as possible after the main board's first briefing. Thirdly, the local briefers have a responsibility to present the company line. So to be able to do this sincerely, everyone really needs to understand and explore the issues in each briefing. No one wants to be in the position of saying 'Well, I don't buy this, but I've been told to tell you...'

Finally, team briefing obviously requires a good level of interpersonal skill in reconciling the different priorities of the company with the needs and receptiveness of the teams at each level. But no one said this was going to be easy. And looking back over the four strategies we've listed here we hope you can see that the common thread running through them is that face-to-face conversation is the key. It is no good trying to introduce major changes, or persuade people to tackle new projects, without face-to-face contact.

<p style="text-align: center;">Inspirational Leadership Blueprint Principle</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Face-to-face communication increases productivity, decreases grievances and increases retention</p>
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Go to our website www.7failings.com and click on the **FREE BONUS DOWNLOADS** section for a list of resources if you want to get started on the team briefing process. This is something we can wholeheartedly recommend as a process – it increases the amount of dialogue and face-to-face conversation across your business.

Conclusion: the benefits of explaining

Really Useless Leaders who don't explain what's going on:

- increase the likelihood of grievances and disciplinary issues among their staff
- kill the alignment of personal goals with a company's business mission
- decrease productivity and morale
- and lose their best people.

Really Useless Leaders just don't seem to recognize that our people, for various reasons, simply don't understand why we might want something done if we don't explain why. Now, why is this 'why' really important? Well, it turns out that we all need three things from our work. We need to feel that what we're doing contributes to the overall goals of the unit or team. Secondly, we need to know 'why' so that we can refine or even radically improve our job, task or project. Remember our people need to have ownership of 'the how' – if we spell out why we're doing something and our people can come up with a better, faster, cheaper way, then we're all winners.

And finally, all of us need to feel from time to time that we're part of something bigger, a community of collaborating managers. In conclusion, then, a good explanation is worth gold to you. You must constantly give a coherent business case. It motivates people. If nothing else, think of it like a good sales executive regards a good explanation. It can always be passed on to someone else, to help make their job easier.

So as well as setting out what your people need to achieve, you should also explain why, till you're blue in the face and in every medium you possibly can. You must build a workplace

where explanation and vision are not buried or skimmed over, but are always open and clear. If it's your job to deliver performance through others, then it's your job to create a clear vision for us all. How good are you at explaining your vision for the business?

And you have to start explaining now

In closing this chapter on the First Failing of Really Useless Leaders let us make a plea. You have to start explaining your vision and strategy *now* and in as many ways as you can. And you have to keep up the momentum. Because explaining takes time. We know this, but sometimes we forget.

**Inspirational Leadership
Blueprint Principle**

**If it's time to get people to do new things –
it's time to make it your mission to explain**

If we take it as read that your new business strategy will deliver greater profitability, or reduce your costs, then you need everyone to do things that will deliver greater profitability or greater cost savings. But if your people just don't understand why you're asking them to go for growth, or why even tougher cost savings matter, then they are unlikely to change the status quo. But the inertia of 'the way we do things round here' can't be shifted in a single day. It's the classic situation of the oil tanker heading across the ocean. If you want to change direction, it's going to take you some time. So if you want better performance productivity and profitability from your people, start today.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jacqueline Moore and Steven Sonsino are a husband and wife team who were originally involved in training media professionals before moving into the field of leadership development. 'The Seven Failings of Really Useless Leaders' is the third book they have written together

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From 2001 until 2004 Steven was Director of the School's Emerging Leaders Programme and he founded the Tomorrow's Leaders Research Group at the School in 2002.

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Steven broadcasts a video podcast on leadership style at **www.leadership.fm**.