

The Trusted Strategic Advisor's Manifesto

Ten Areas for Serious Personal and Professional Consideration and Reflection

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First, Change Your Mindset and Your Entire Philosophy of Work

1. All problems are management and organizational problems before they are any other kind of problem.

- a. Start where managers and leaders are rather than where you are.
- b. Look at the world from their perspective first.
- c. Study leaders and leadership of all kinds (your staff expertise matters very little).
- d. All managers and leaders think they are excellent communicators (and better than you or me).
- e. If all you have is your primary staff function, it will be a long time between calls from the boss.

2. All management problems are leadership challenges.

- a. Your job is to help reduce contention and get to consensus and decisions, maybe even agreement.
- b. Stay focused on the problem rather than distractions like what the media might do.
- c. When there are ethical problems, help leaders meet the ethical expectations of those they lead.
 - **Find the truth as soon as possible:** Tell that truth and act on it promptly.
 - **Promptly raise the tough questions and answer them thoughtfully:** This includes asking and answering questions yet to be asked or thought of by those who will be affected by whatever the circumstance is.
 - **Teach by parable:** Emphasizing wrong-way/right-way options.
 - **Vocalize core business values and ideals constantly:** Most core values are a set of ideas thought up on a management golf outing, brought in on the back of a clubhouse napkin, then printed and posted without another word being spoken. The values and ideals of a business are what employees and others bring to work every day.
 - **Walk the talk:** Be accessible; help people understand the organization within the context of its values and ideals at every opportunity.
 - **Help, expect and enforce ethical leadership:** People are watching; people are counting; people know when there are lapses in ethics causing trust to be

broken. When bad things happen in good organizations, it's those occasional lapses that deepen the troubles.

- **Preserve, protect, defend and foster ethical pathways to the top of the organization:** Constantly identify, explain, explore and warn about situations where ethical processes can be compromised on the way, especially among executives who are on upward career trajectories.
- **Be a cheerleader, model and teacher of ethical behavior:** Ethical behavior builds and maintains trust. In fact, to have trust in an organization requires that its leaders act ethically constantly.
- **Make values equal to profits:** Most people seem to enjoy working more when they are with organizations they respect, people they trust and leadership they can rely on. Wherever you find an organization or company that puts values on the same level as profits, there is often even more loyalty and support because companies who do this sacrifice profits for principle. Everybody notices.
- **Walk the talk:** Be accessible; help people understand the organization within the context of its values and ideals at every opportunity.

3. Leadership resides with those who can maintain more supporters than detractors.

- a. Help management and leadership stay focused.
- b. Help the leaders preserve and develop new followers.

4. Remember whose "bus" it is and who's driving.

- a. It is their bus and they get to drive it wherever they want.
- b. Staff functions exist and are funded by leadership to help leaders **do their jobs better**.
- c. Staff functions have limitations.
- d. Change the changeable; do the doable; know the knowable.

5. Managers and leaders want to make the decisions...and problem solve often based on the advice they receive from trusted strategic advisors.

- a. Stop trying to find solutions (staff people rarely know enough about a business to find them.) Many staff people cannot add, subtract, multiply or divide reliably. 100% of the people we work for can.
- b. Focus on recommending smaller, more doable options for immediate, incremental implementation that can lead to bigger, more important decisions and breakthroughs.
- c. Rather than seek a single big recommendation, shoot for three smaller action options every time. **Option one:** do nothing and see what happens is always an option bosses and lawyers are thinking about. **Option two:** do something that meets a reasonable number of expectations for resolution. **Option three:** do something more than is expected.

- d. Train yourself to use this option recommendation strategy and you will be called back, earlier, faster and listened to ahead of the counselor who always has the perfect single solution.

6. Do what they want most.

- a. **Be candid:** truth with an attitude, delivered right now. Stop withholding things. Candor is your most powerful trust builder.
- b. **Help the boss with what to do next:** Much of their work is unknown. They have to figure it out; be ready with options.
- c. **Provide advice on the spot:** Biggest frustration for operators - staffers leave and then come back later with advice, often way too late. Train yourself to give cogent information on the spot.
- d. **Provide options:** This strategy and approach will change your life and the lives of those you advise, forever. They will notice you and you will become more influential and important.
- e. **Say things that matter:** Stop with speculating about what the media will do or any other player, for that matter. Always say things that are substantial. When the conversation goes off track you are the one who asks, "Does this really matter?" If it doesn't matter, say so and move on.
- f. **Say things that the boss doesn't know:** Communicators in many organizations are known as "Chicken Little" in the outfit. Always trying to get attention by scaring people, warning about impending disaster, but then withholding or not really knowing key information.

7. Seven tests you'll have to pass that demonstrate you have become a trusted strategic advisor:

- 1) People remember what you say and quote you when you're not in the room.
- 2) People quote you in your presence.
- 3) People tell your stories and share the lessons, giving you the credit.
- 4) People tell your stories and share your lessons as though those stories and lessons belonged to them.
- 5) Others seek your opinions and ideas, then share their agendas and beliefs with you in the hope of influencing you to influence the behaviors and decisions of others more senior than either of you.
- 6) The boss asks others to run their stuff by you before running it by them.
- 7) Meetings are held up waiting for you to arrive to make important contributions or interpretations of current events.

8. Before you seek to become a trusted strategic advisor, ask yourself:

- a. Do I have the stomach for the intense, conflict-ridden and often confrontational environment in which decisions are made at the senior levels of organizations?
- b. Can I dispassionately assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, options and threats to the organization from a variety of useful constructive perspectives (more than just the media)?
- c. What is the real expertise, beyond my area of staff knowledge, that I bring to those who run my organization?
- d. Will I commit to mastering the seven disciplines of the trusted strategic advisor and harness their power for my success and the success of those I advise?
- e. How do I credibly and convincingly answer the question, "Why should the boss listen to me?"

9. Random wisdom to be taken very seriously:

- a. If you're a communicator, talk about the media will get you nowhere. Every executive and manager, even first-line supervisors, think they are great communicators.
- b. You need more than communication or your present staff function. This is true even for lawyers. Most bosses think they are smarter than lawyers too.
- c. Read and study the *Harvard Business Review*. It is the most read business journal on the planet. There are many other good business journals, the more you review the better.
- d. Find out what your bosses read or view and read those too.
- e. Strive to be memorable, tell stories, seek to inspire and motivate those you work for. These are skills you can learn and they make you more valuable.

10. Six big mistakes:

- 1) **Withhold information:** Destroys trust, encourages avoiding you and your advice.
- 2) **Shielding the boss** from other advisors, consultants and voices: When there's trouble, look for voices the boss should/would like to hear. Break down the barriers and get them together. Do they have a favorite business author? Put them together for lunch. Do they have a favorite business commentator or academic? Get them together. Which peers should they be talking to? It's easier than you think. The point is, especially when there's trouble, bosses reach out for all the information they can possibly get and more. Be the one who shatters the ring of staff protection that forms around top people. That ring tends to hide malfeasance, disloyalty, unethical behaviors and other bad things that will surface sometime, especially during times of trouble.
- 3) **Pushing ideas** that the boss will never do: A good rule to have about pushing ideas is if the boss doesn't start doing it within ten days, give it up. You have lots more ideas anyway, pick another one. Unless what they are doing is illegal, immoral, unethical, monumentally stupid or wasteful, then you have a decision to make about working for them. Adults rarely change, even in catastrophe. It's their bus, they get to do what they want. So, give it up after 10 days. If it doesn't matter to them, why should it matter to you? Whose bus is it? All too often I hear senior people complain about their bosses not listening or refusing to change. They don't have to. Get over it. Senior practitioners

often stay on, mistakenly thinking they could change the person they work for. Fool's errand. They don't know or care. Find another bus.

How to quickly test the value of an idea (Before you open your mouth). If it fails to meet all these criteria, move on:

- a. Helps the boss achieve his or her objectives and goals.
 - b. Helps the organization achieve its goals.
 - c. If a and b are yes, ask yourself: Is the idea still truly necessary.
 - d. Keeps money.
 - e. Makes money.
 - f. Saves money.
 - g. Aspects of the business will fail or not progress without your suggestion.
- 4) **Lying:** The ultimate trust buster. If you're really good, you might be forgiven the first time. If you're not really good, better get your resignation letter prepared quickly. Being a trusted strategic advisor is the position of highest trust.
- 5) **Being "Chicken Little":** Very few problems that managers and leaders face are crises. But every crisis is a serious business, leadership and organizational problem. Take a break before ever using the word "crisis." Then tell it like it is.
- Key ingredients of a crisis:
- a. **People stopper**
 - b. **Show stopper**
 - c. **Product stopper**
 - d. **Reputation redefining event(s)**
 - e. **Create victims** (people, animals, living systems)
 - f. **Explosive visibility** (but not always)
- 6) **Disloyalty:** PSSSSST, here's what they know you are doing:
- Criticizing, badmouthing or winning about management behind they back.
 - Complaining about their inability to adequately recognize your inherent talent, insight and general smartness.
 - Holding back key information you should be sharing (or so they imagine, it is rarely the case).
 - Talking solutions but delivering only tactical ideas without really knowing the business problems the organization and its leaders face.. They already know all 14 public relations tactics.
 - Being vocally disappointed that some of your best advice is regularly ignored but you fail to speak up in meetings. When you do speak up its more an expression of exasperation than an offer of simple, sensible, doable, meaningful, constructive and positive advice.

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