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YOU, THE LEADER OF THE PACK: A 12-STEP RECOVERY PROGRAM

Why have a chapter on leadership when the last eight chapters in this book have been loaded with proactive steps for leaders? The answer is that each of the previous chapters has focused on one particular element of strategic leadership. This chapter presents an overarching perspective on the kinds of *personal* leadership that you will need to demonstrate to inspire people to do the extraordinary, break-from-the-pack things that have been described throughout this book.

I'm pleased to say that oh-so-common admonitions like "have a vision," "empower people," "build teams," and "communicate" are absent from this chapter. Such nostrums do have value, but they do not ignite and sustain the kind of leadership you need to effect transformation in your organization. Moreover, terms like these have been corrupted. I've seen so many bland, uninspiring, and me-too "vision statements" that I could swear I've seen the same words in other companies' vision statements. (Is there a factory somewhere that mass-produces vision statements?) I've observed earnest leaders trying to "empower" their people by loosening their chains a little bit and giving them slightly more freedom to improve (but not transcend) their commodity products and services. I've looked in on training sessions in which participants dutifully learn communication

and teamwork skills, and then return to their places in top-down structures with fiefdoms and closed doors. In such cases, the payoff was negligible.

To add some serious value to both your organization and your career prospects, you will need to move beyond nostrums. You will need to get down to the bare-knuckles basics of leadership. If you've read this far, you're pumped up to help your organization break from the pack. You're willing to take on the blueprints for change outlined in the prior chapters. Most important, as a leader, you're ready to commit to some new and rigorous behaviors, and leave some low-value habits behind. For you, I've developed a "12-Step Program" to put you on the path to success. If you take it seriously, you'll spur your organization and your career to the head of the pack.

Step 1: First, Admit You're a Commodity

This admonition pertains to your organization's products, your organization's value proposition, and your own career. They're all impacted by the ravages of the Copycat Economy. The first step to salvation is to admit it.

Your Career as a Commodity

Before we look at your company and your business, let's take a look at something even more fundamental: your career.

In this Copycat Economy, the skills and competencies that have brought you career success so far are themselves becoming imitated and commoditized. The entire outsourcing and offshoring phenomena are based on the proposition that our jobs can be performed as well and often more cheaply by people who are outside the company and maybe even abroad. Automation and digitalization mean that the skills we thought gave us added-value are, well, not even worth doing by a human. The characteristics that do make us human—our expertise, experiences, enthusiasm, creativity, and leadership abilities—require constant revision and renewal to remain relevant. Amid the intense competitive pressures of the Copycat Economy, we get either updated or outdated.

Even if your job and leadership position don't appear to be on the block, it is to your advantage to proactively seek to enhance your abilities before they become commodities in the eyes of the market—and your bosses. Don't cling to habits that are becoming irrelevant. Don't cling to skills that are becoming commonplace. Don't simply wait for your company to offer you “training.” Seek learning and new knowledge from anywhere and anyone—continuously. Make it *your* responsibility to decommoditize your competencies and unimitate your capabilities.

Your Business as a Commodity

Even as you seek to break from the pack as an individual, you will be wise to admit that in a Copycat Economy, whatever your organization is doing and providing today—no matter how lucrative and “hot” it is—is right now becoming imitated and commoditized, and, therefore, will inevitably require significant change. You cannot wait until the need for change sends your organization into a death spiral. Dave Dorman, the outgoing CEO of a collapsed AT&T at the time it was bought by SBC in 2005, learned this the hard way. “If you don't shape the future by making changes, it will happen anyway,” he said. This is where leadership comes in, and the first step in leadership is to “come clean.”

Here's what I mean by coming clean: If you join Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or a similar group, the first step in its 12-step program is to admit your real problem. If you don't cop to it, you won't do the hard work of change. You'll rationalize your current behaviors. You might go through the motions, but in reality you'll stay close to the familiar. You'll continue doing what you've done in the past.

Of course, I'm not equating management with addiction, and I'm not suggesting that a manager who fails to challenge a withering product line, supply chain, or corporate culture is the same as an alcoholic who fails to challenge his or her own self-destructive behaviors. But the metaphor is useful because if you want your organization to lead the pack, your first step as a leader is to acknowledge the cold, hard reality that nothing escapes commoditization and imitation, including whatever you and your organization are currently doing.

To acknowledge the need for significant change is a courageous step. Florida State University football coach Bobby Bowden defines courage as “something you need to do that might get you hurt.” The

path of changes is pockmarked with periodic pain, setbacks, frustration, and disappointment. This is fortunate because if those changes weren't filled with pain, setbacks, frustration, and disappointment, everybody would do them and you'd be stuck right back in the pack.

Back in the 1990s, after examining the realities of softening financials, drop-off in customer renewals, and impending disruptive technologies, Unisys senior vice president Jim McGuirk courageously confessed that his Federal System division's business model was becoming a commodity, with a three-year window before it reached what he labeled "dinosaur status." That acknowledgment spurred him to transform a transaction-driven, product-oriented hardware and software business into one that sold customized expertise and tailored IT solutions to government agencies, and then raced to the head of the pack. "I decided we could work on managing a dying business and squeezing whatever we could out of it," he told me, "or we could change the business. I didn't want to get stuck in trying to revitalize a dying horse."

In a Copycat Economy, all horses eventually die. If your horse is dying now, dismount the way McGuirk did. If you're lucky enough to be sitting atop a Triple Crown winner, then ride like the wind, but don't get complacent and arrogant enough to assume your steed will gallop indefinitely. Even as you're riding your winner today, anticipate he'll gradually fall back in the pack, and start preparing the winner for tomorrow. Admit your organization's output is becoming a commodity before it actually does become one, and commit to initiating appropriate changes today. That's the first rule.

Step 2: Take a Risk on Risk

Strategy guru Gary Hamel has dryly noted that strategy appears "easy" only if you copy someone else's. But as we've seen throughout this book, that's potentially the riskiest strategy of all. Despite all our affection for concepts like innovation and entrepreneurship, however, we are often strikingly risk averse, even when we're dissatisfied with the status quo. We fear the negative consequences of risk, even as we ignore the even more negative consequences of staying the course. Instead, the second rule posits that we need to reassess risk and then take a prudent risk on risk.

As leaders, we should always undertake due diligence before taking action, but there's no way to cut all risk if you're breaking new