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*I frequently work with companies who are trying to establish a culture of continuous process improvement to maximize their profitability and productivity. From the time we start working with the organization, I can typically predict within the first several months if the effort has the potential for outstanding success or just mediocre results.*

*The difference in the organizations that achieve outstanding success is active leadership from the start and ongoing support even during tough times. Dr. Deming would have called this constancy of purpose. It requires a management team that is committed to the effort and, from the beginning, is truly leading the change effort as active participants.*

*The following article supports my belief and as you read it, I hope it provides you some food for thought in your upcoming plans and critical goals for 2009.*

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## **Follow My Leader - To Effect Change, Leaders Must Walk the Talk!**

*by Glen Feechan*

### **A Leader's Role**

In any change project, a leader must wear many hats; however his/her role can be split into two key areas:

1. Set the strategic direction of the change, and
2. Convince everyone of its importance

The importance of the first part of this role is generally understood and is for another article on another day; however, the second part is often overlooked (or done very badly) and can be of even greater importance.

Where this point is addressed, it is generally done by giving presentations and distributing memos. Although these can be necessary, they are often ignored or just paid lip service if the most important method of communicating the importance of the project is missed – action.

### **“Do as I Say, Not as I do!”**

Many of us will have heard this line from our parents (some of us just might have been known to use it with our own kids now and again), but can we remember how patronizing it felt?

Too often this is the message communicated to employees from senior management during a major change. Employees are expected to attend seminars and workshops (and are sent memos and emails stressing their importance). These may even be preceded by a major presentation from the managing director, stating that everyone must give full support to the project. The senior management then goes about their day-to-day jobs as if nothing has changed.

The Managing Director misses a session he was scheduled to attend because he has a meeting with a major client, then the Sales Director uses this excuse at the next session, which the Finance Director also misses because he has a meeting with the auditors. In the next round of workshops, there are no salesmen able to attend (they all have meetings with clients); the payroll clerk cannot attend because the wages must be processed and the management accountant makes his excuses because he is under pressure to get the month-end accounts out.

Pretty soon the project is completely off the rails and the managing director is wondering what went wrong. The simple fact is that people follow the examples of their leaders rather than what they are told. When the Managing Director demonstrated that his meeting with a client was more important than the project, this message was picked up by the Sales Director (who also has important meetings with clients), then comes the Finance Director, who is quite sure that his meeting with the auditors is at least as important as any client meeting. This message is then cascaded down to those reporting to these directors, until no-one is attaching any importance to this project.

### **Perception Is Reality**

Not only must the senior management team give the project the priority it deserves (and that they are telling everyone else that it has); they must go out of their way to be seen to do so. This is often best done by doing something out of character that clearly (and publicly) demonstrates the importance of the project. This may involve such activities as missing a regular golfing trip to attend a workshop session (no-one said it was going to be easy) or coming in on a Saturday morning to attend a session with Saturday staff. The trick is to get people talking in the lunchroom about how important the management must see this project as, if the Managing Director is missing his golf/Saturday mornings, etc.

### **Listen and Act**

As a project progresses, one of the best ways to demonstrate its importance is to listen to feedback from workshops, etc. and act on it as soon as possible. This demonstrates that the project can really make a difference and that this is everyone's opportunity to contribute to how the business operates.

If senior management can demonstrate this level of commitment, the project is well on the way to success.