

Leading from the Balcony

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Business leaders have to be able to view patterns as if they were on a balcony. It does them no good to be swept into the field of action.

Ron Heifetz and Donald Laurie

Often leaders pride themselves on being in the middle of the action, calling the shots and making things happen. These leaders may miss a unique and powerful vantage point that can make the difference between success and failure as a leader. This vantage point results when you move from the dance floor, where the action takes place, to the balcony, where you can observe from a wider angle, moving from individual dynamics to larger patterns.

In fact, leaders add the most value when they view their teams “from the balcony”. Leadership from the balcony doesn’t mean being apart or aloof from the team. It doesn’t represent physical space. Instead, it is a mindset that is reflected in this quote by Lao Tzu:

*If you fail to honor your people,
They will fail to honor you;
It is said of a good leader that
When the work is done, the aim fulfilled,
The people will say, “We did this ourselves.”*

*Lao Tzu, 604-531 B. C.,
Founder of Taoism, Tao Te Ching*

“Leading from the balcony” allows you to focus on your most important work – improving the overall functioning of your team rather than just doing the day-to-day work. When your team functions at a much higher level, the quality of their work improves, their confidence soars and their pride in their accomplishments increases. It is only when they feel “we did this ourselves” that they will assume responsibility for on-going improvements that would have escaped your notice. Self-accountability is key for a high performing team.

The most important elements to focus on “from the balcony” are:

The Charter: (Why the team exists)

Shared understanding of team’s:

- Mission
- Customers and their requirements
- Guiding values
- Goals
- Metrics for tracking performance

The Design: (What the team does)

- Understanding and efficiency of core work processes
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- Understanding of own jobs and how jobs interrelate
- Technical competence
- Clear work procedures
- Clear decision authority
- Systems aligned to support goals

Relationships: (How people work together)

- Level of trust and respect
- Positive, supportive atmosphere
- Level of cooperation
- Conflicts worked through to win-win solutions
- How well team members listen to each other and express themselves freely
- Fair and equitable personnel policies and procedures

Application:

1. How would “leading from the balcony” change your leadership behavior?
2. What do you see when you view your team “from the balcony”?
3. What are your team’s strong and weak points relative to its Charter, Design and Relationships?

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