Acumen in five domains of leadership to navigate the contemporary workforce.

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Acumen is defined as keenness and depth of perception, insight or discernment, especially in practical matters. Such has become very difficult but very important to achieve in our modern world of leadership. The complexity that makes up our environment joined with the interrelated complications blended into the world’s contextual richness cause distortions, fuels assumptions and develops mental models quick to form and difficult to change. These conditions influence everyone and tend to skew our perception. Leaders must work to be objective, informed and accurate in the way they see, interpret and act. Leaders must view today’s work-place environment as complex, complicated and contextual. As a result, the leader must be proactive in in-depth sensemaking to form accurate interpretations of reality. The ability to make sense of issues and then frame them in specific terms that are understood clearly is a critical function of contemporary leadership.

As a leader, we lead a diverse group of human beings who all have feelings, attitudes, and beliefs that may differ from one to the other. No matter their race, sex, creed, age, beliefs or religion we have a responsibility to value them and become their leader. We live in polarized times where ideology may cause tensions and promote turbulence within the workplace. Leaders must not fall victim to subjective feelings or beliefs that drive these contrary forces that divide rather than unite. Leaders must forge coalitions and influence people toward common goals and outcomes that meet or exceed the expectations of the organization they serve.

Leadership involves a constantly altering relationship between people, power, identity, and context where constant tension, forces, and influences produce the management styles between freedom and control. This nature comes in concert with actions, events, perceptions, knowledge, agency, and passion that operate between stability and chaos in an environment of parallels and paradoxes. All are influenced by and dependent on developing currents of rich contextual features interconnected in complexity in both individual and group social dynamics.

Thus, leadership becomes an ecosystem involving the utility of personal traits, competence, confidence, humility, advocacy, relationships, and practice. It all depends on one's ability to be self-aware, self-reflective and self-regulated in order to influence and navigate the context-rich, complex and dynamic work environment that the leader navigates.¹

Central to this concept is a leader’s capacity to strive to remain self-disciplined toward objectivity, openness to change, while making skillful empathetic and informed judgments in their role of processing information, interacting with others and making decisions.²

Quality relationships are essential to leadership. The foundation and key element to any architecture to develop and sustain a relationship is trust. Building and maintaining trust is best found in the acronym R.O.C.C. that represents Reliability, Openness, Competency, and Compassion.³
Reliability defines someone who can be counted on to do what they say they will and as a result build a reputation of credibility. Openness describes someone who is honest, demonstrates integrity, and practices complete transparency. Competency involves the knowledge, skills, and abilities, with the conceptual capacities, personality traits, and experiences that result in sound performance. Competency involves a coordinated waltz between the wisdom to know and the discipline to behave consistently with the accurate knowledge to drive conduct. Compassion uses empathy as a filter for the perspective to factor into the equation of situational awareness.

Trust is essential to leadership and the glue that holds relationships together. Relationship is key to communication and maneuvering through the intuitive and emotional forces that captivate and drive human behavior.

This article will focus on the component of competency. Behaviors that reflect competence and trustworthiness enhance the credibility of a leader. While an inability to demonstrate relevant job knowledge hurts credibility, as does behavior that isn’t aligned with the organization. This science illustrates the importance of a leader’s competency. Paramount to achieve and maintain competency is the ability to not fall victim to ignorance through intellectual laziness or be deceived from being contextually blindness. Leaders must see objective reality over a subjective perception. In addition, leaders must value growth and development, open-mindedness, employees voicing concerns through feedback, procedural fairness and communication skills.

First and foremost is the leaders embracing of and devotion to a growth mindset. This is a constant and on-going drive toward learning, growing and developing the capacity within one’s domains of craft. Central to this concept is the dedication to effort as a tremendous utility and value in everyday work. Effort defines the time spent to observe, study, analyze, learn and evaluate the contextual features found within the domains of competency in one’s profession and develop an adaptable expertise in that subject matter. With competence comes confidence that promotes leaders to feel comfortable in their own shoes and become self-assured rather than insecure. Secure leaders engage, adapt, delegate and manage well. This same mentality must include all subordinates where their growth and development are viewed by the leader as crucial to creating an individual and group motivation to becoming a learning organization that performs well.

Second, is the dedication and discipline to an active open-mindedness regarding the interpretations of the totality of the facts and circumstances and how they integrate into the contextual features in any given situation, issue or event. Central to this is a process where context is viewed through four different lenses or perspectives. This four-framed model perspective impacts the way leaders think about things, surfaces possibilities not seen before and helps understand the dynamics of problems. The first lens is the structural or rational side. This perspective deals with roles, responsibilities, strategies, goals, policies, procedures, technology and environment. The second lens looks at the human side, the perspective regarding the impact or effect upon the subordinates or employees. This perspective incorporates empathy and relationships. The third lens involves the political perspective regarding how scarce resources are divided, who gets what and why. This perspective involves power, conflict, and competition that occurs in every workplace. Third and finally, is the symbolic lens. This perspective examines the
culture, meaning and myths that live within the organization. By looking through these four lenses separately leaders become more aware and better-informed regarding decisions and their consequences. This involves a divergent thought process where we withhold judgment and seek to find things out, before shifting to a convergent thought process that is driven to sort things out.

Third, is the organizational culture created by the leader that obligates people to speak up and provide feedback, absent any interpersonal fear of retribution. A feedback rich environment protects the leader and insulates the organization from unforeseen problems. Further, such a psychologically safe climate for subordinates mitigates risk and improves performance. vii Vision, expectations, and direction are essential to any leader’s repertoire, but only after being vetted through the prism of operational reality. When the leader’s plans are measured from the ground up by candid dialogue and shaped to fit within the scope of the realities of functions, systems and processes at work they are grounded and sound. However when a leader “shoehorns” their subjective measures from the top-down, oblivious to feedback, and not grounded in operational reality then the organization is set up for adverse issues and unintended consequences.

Fourth, is sustaining an organizationally and procedurally just work environment. Such requires leaders treating people with dignity and respect. Leaders ensuring they subordinates have an opportunity to voice their concerns and leaders who explain their decision-making process while acting in a fair and impartial mannerviii

Fifth and finally, is being able to strategically frame communications in a meaningful manner grounded in facts, objectivity and put forth in a responsible behavioral descriptive way instead of an ad hominem way. Disagreement should be centered in respectful dialogue by listening and trying to understand instead of prejudgment or intolerance to new information. Leaders should be strategic in planning their essential elements of information that make up their theme before they speak. Then frame their theme in such fashion that the context can be defined in the here and now in a meaningful way that connects with others.ix Often, people perceive true leadership emerge through this process.

These five domains develop and sustain trust, build relationship and mitigate risk while optimizing leadership competency and performance for better outcomes.

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