Developing Your Operating Cadence

by Mani Ashleman

Years ago, I worked with a leader who sometimes had staff meetings and sometimes didn't. He had metrics that he wanted to see except for when he didn't care about those metrics. He wanted his team to provide him with updates on projects but only when he needed them and his team never knew exactly when that would be or what he would be asking about. So, a few members of his team were always ready with all of these items because they never knew when they would need to provide the updates and other members of the team were never ready with these items because they never knew when they would need to provide the updates. Additionally, they all updated him using different types of information, levels of detail, formats, formulas, etc. It created an environment of inefficiency, frustration and lack of discipline and this ultimately it became visible to the rest of the organization and damaged individual and departmental credibility and self-esteem. He created subculture of fire-fighting and "martyrs" (save the day personalities).

The drumbeat by which you manage is your operating cadence. This seems incredibly basic and that may be where we sometimes dismiss its importance. We sometimes lose our way because we feel that we've "graduated" from the fundamentals and we've been promoted to the next level in the organization which requires different methods of leadership. This is absolutely true. How you lead and manage is different at different levels in an organization. I want to distinguish between leadership style and methodology versus developing a framework in which you will deploy your leadership at any level in any organization. What I am referring to here is a disciplined operating cadence.

When you don't have an operating cadence there are many things can go wrong. It's a bit like leading your team through a cell phone with static where you only hear every other word.

1. Priorities are not clear. Fires need to be put out and tactical activities take precedence to organizational or departmental strategy.

2. Communication of information becomes tangled. Information gaps and miscommunication derail or create rework, missed work and frustration.

3. Leaders don't have critical information needed. When pressed for status, metrics, data, leaders have to "go back to their teams" to quickly gather the data and throw together a presentation that attempts to make them look well informed (this hardly ever works).

4. When additional assignments or projects are requested, the leader has no ability to say one way or another whether his/her team is able to take it on or not because there is no regular frame of reference. If he has a team that aims to please, they may be supportive and say "yes." If the team is less than supportive, they may say "no" and he can't tell one way or another whether they can or can't fit the project into their schedules. Usually, this is when it is helpful to have a team "martyr" that saves the day and provides the support despite their already busy 12-hour work day.

5. It becomes difficult to assess the individuals on the team and the team dynamics. How each team members contributes to the meetings tells the leader about the quality of their work, progress, perseverance, relationships, work style, etc.

There are several key components of a managerial cadence, but ultimately it is about:

1. What to track,
2. Why you are tracking it
3. How often to track it
4. When/where to deep dive

These seem simple enough, but this is where it can get become a little more challenging. If you don't manage this carefully, you can find yourself anywhere along a continuum of tracking too much information, too frequently and in a complicated structure that no one understands all the way to what I described above. So this links closely to the priorities and expectations for your organization and ensuring that you keep the vision of what you are trying to accomplish in front of you at all times. In terms of what comes first – priorities or cadence, I would generally say that if you establish some type of cadence fairly quickly, it will become a lot easier to develop priorities with your team.

If you try to establish your priorities without this rhythm, you will probably find yourself setting up priorities on your own and asking for feedback from your team. The latter will create a short term focus with some team involvement and little ownership for the results. Knowing which pieces of information to gather and which levers to pull to create specific effects is a function of understanding the technical aspects of your role, your team and the organization. There is no shortage of articles speculating on cause and effect. However . . .

There are also different ways of collecting, sharing and discussing information and different audiences for each one. Everyone does not need or want all of the potential information that is out there. In addition, giving too much information to people without being clear about what is relevant to them may create additional confusion about what you are expecting of them.

1. Individual Meetings
2. Spreadsheets, emails, databases, etc.
3. Staff Meetings
4. Global Functional Meetings
5. Annual Meetings
6. Project/Initiative Meetings
7. Organization specific meetings (Strategy, Goal Deployment, Operating Reviews, Finance Reviews, Talent Meetings, etc)
8. Town Hall Meetings
9. Walk-abouts

Each of these has their place, but they may not all be necessary. Just as important is how you conduct each because that will determine the culture that you will develop. The process of linking the types of information you need with the different ways of monitoring requires thought and planning particularly if the discipline of it doesn't come easily or naturally to you.

One simple way is to develop a spreadsheet or table. On the vertical axis, list the critical items or categories of items that you will need to review (kpis, projects, results, performance, etc). On the horizontal axis, layout a series of columns: detailed description of topics, frequency, participant list, format, etc. Another way is to

lay out the meetings that you know you will have (staff, finance, project, etc) and plan what will be covered at each meeting with specific expectations of the participants. The exercise of planning out what you want to track and how you will do it helps to organize the structure in your own mind and the final document serves as a helpful tool for your team as well. If you are in the beginning stages of getting to know an organization or re-directing a group you feel is going in the wrong direction, start with the cadence and work with the group to determine what it will look like going forward. Soon you will be setting priorities and providing clarity and purpose to your team.