

A Pretty Good Definition of Leadership

BY KARL HELLMAN

All strategic marketers must lead.

First, they must persuade their companies to make the correct decisions for their product. No mean feat, since all organizations hate making decisions.

Second, they must motivate and guide their companies in implementing the decisions and approved plans. A Herculean labor, since it typically requires the coordination and cooperation of multiple silos, each of which has its own plans and priorities.

Third, they must lead the company's thinking about their product. A tricky task, since everyone has their own, typically partially valid view.

In fact, product management was created to provide exactly these kinds of leadership.

After decades of successfully marketing Ivory Soap with a “99 and 44 one hundredths percent pure” positioning, Procter & Gamble wanted to introduce Camay, a beauty soap with a completely different target market and positioning. But decision by decision, the P & G organization made Camay more and more like Ivory.

So P & G appointed a brand manager to look out for the interests of this new product and its distinct set of potential customers. He had no staff. He had no budget. He had no superior organization chart level. Sound familiar?

But he had data. The product manager's number one weapon. And he was the world's expert on his product which gave him credibility and legitimacy. And he used the data to make the business case behind each of the “right” decisions for Camay.

Amid the dozens of daily demands and details, it's easy to forget that your greatest contribution as a product manager is not to provide one more special pricing quote or to respond to one more salesman's 11th hour plea for help on a sales call—it's to lead your organization to make the right decisions, to motivate multiple departments to cooperate on implementation, and to clarify your organization's thinking about a product—to make them see that it's time to invest, or time to migrate customers to another product.

How can each of us provide the leadership our products and our companies so desperately need?

Data are certainly the foundation. You must become the world's expert on your product and you must understand what the data mean.

You must provide vision—that is, you must envision a feasible path forward from where you are to

a more successful state—a path your organization is actually capable of taking.

And you must be trustworthy. You must be the kind of person people believe have their best interests at heart.

When I think about the qualities of a leader, I picture Flora Kurgonis.

Flora Kurgonis always did the right thing.

She had learned life is too precious to do anything else.

One night when she was a very young wife and mother, her husband, an officer in the Lithuanian Army, woke her and said dissidents, including the families of army officers were being “rounded up” and that she must flee immediately with their infant son.

Flora ran out of money somewhere in Poland, sold her horse, and walked the rest of the way to Denmark where she managed to get passage to the US. She worked during the day and went to school at night and became an engineer. Flora shot right up the corporate ladder and became the first woman to head her company's engineering department.

One day she walked into her General Manager's office and said, “We need one common set of information. Marketing has its customer information. Operations keeps its own information, because they don't trust marketing. Finance doesn't trust either of them. And customer service has pieced together its own information based on field visits.”

“Every department is making mistakes because they have the wrong information. And the customers are being mis-served. They look at us and wonder, ‘Don't you people ever talk to each other?’”

The General Manager agreed and put Flora in charge of a ‘One single truth’ task force—Marketing, Sales, Operations, Finance, Customer Service, and Information Technology. Most people liked and admired Flora, but even those who were still dealing with Flora's gender believed that she had the best interests at heart for the customer, the company as a whole, and even their individual department. And everyone knew she was backed by the G.M.

Most people cooperated with Flora's task force, simply because they trusted Flora.

It took her over two years, but Flora finally began to produce results. A true engineer, she began with the “heavy half” of the job: Those projects that would produce the most benefit with the least investment. She certainly used data to find, evaluate, and compare improvement opportunities, but just as important was the judgment she brought to the problem, based on having performed, then supervised, and finally directed the activities that had gotten out of sync.

Departments finally began making fewer mistakes and had more time to enhance service. Customers began to notice and were impressed. Sales found it easier to up-sell. People felt better about the job they were doing.

Flora's task force continued to make incremental progress for several years. With the “low hanging fruit” already harvested, judgment and experience became increasingly important, and Flora had to have the courage to lead the continued improvement effort, to approve the designs and the plans, and the spending—even though the payoffs were smaller, and the uncertainties just as great.

Flora's success was pretty simple, really. People helped her and cooperated with her and each other because they trusted her. She was sharp too; she knew what had to get done. She had a vision of marketing, sales, operations, finance, customer service, and information technology sharing information and cooperating—to serve customers better. And she had the courage to do what she thought was right.

Vision. Expertise. Trust. Courage. A pretty good definition of leadership.