

## **From Leading Few to Leading Many**

© 2012 Brad Lebo

[brad.lebo@vitalgrowthllc.com](mailto:brad.lebo@vitalgrowthllc.com)

Countless books and articles have examined the topic of leadership. Some popular titles: *Primal Leadership* and *Lincoln on Leadership* and *Leadership 101* and, a favorite based on title alone: *The Introvert's Guide to Success in Business and Leadership*.

The presence of so many useful books has not seemed to make a difference in guiding small business entrepreneurs/owners through the gauntlet to becoming slightly larger business entrepreneurs/owners. Indeed, the transition from running a small organization (less than 10 people) to running a larger organization, is the Achilles heel of most entrepreneurs/owners we work with.

Why is this the case? There are at least three parts to the answer. The first part is that the leadership role changes from being a leader of few to a leader of many. A leader of few can lead by example and compensate for any shortcomings of the few employees in the organization—that is, not depend on them completely for the organization's success. This is the leader who steps in to make up for skill or attitude deficits among her employees. In contrast, the leader of many is no longer as visible to others in the organization and must depend on them, shortcomings and all, for the success of the enterprise.

Perhaps an analogy will help make the point (if you'll allow me a little artistic license). Think of a chain. In a short chain (small organization), one strong link can compensate for the weaknesses of the other links by bearing the weight for the weak links from time to time. As the chain grows in length (a larger organization), it's no longer possible for the strong link to "cover" for the weak links.

The second part of the answer is that as an organization grows and the leadership role changes, the leader of many must also be able to communicate beyond the limits of leading by example. This means the leader of many must use other ways than just setting an example, to ensure that the entire organization, now a bigger audience, knows where they are being led and what is expected of them. In other words, he must learn to communicate and instill a sense of purpose into others who may only see him rarely.

To recap, the leader of many has to reach more people than the leader of few, changing her role and necessitating that she be better at communicating how and where she is leading her followers.

The third part of the answer is that the leader of many must spend more and more time being a leader of an organization and not a salesperson/provider of the business' services

or products. Many of the entrepreneurs/owners we work with spend a healthy percentage of their day as chief salesperson or chief engineer or chief service provider. This is fine, of course, but it also limits the growth of the business. To release the organization's full potential, the leader must become good at three tasks that go with being a leader of many.

The first task is to divine and then communicate a vision for the future. The heavy lifting in this task includes both formulating a vision and then communicating the vision in a way that is meaningful to others.

The second task is selecting and developing the "right people." As Jim Collins said, "People are not your important asset. The *right* people are."

Picking the right people requires a leader of many to know what skills or competencies are required for growing the business. In addition, a leader must identify the values that shape behavior within the enterprise and guide interaction with its customers and suppliers. The awareness of both competencies and values is the foundation for choosing the right people and ensuring a good fit.

The third task of the leader of many is holding others accountable. With the wrong people, this is a major stumbling block and pitfall for entrepreneurs/owners. There are several reasons for this including feelings of loyalty, friendship and unclear expectations, which makes judging performance difficult.

Even with the right people, it can take real discipline (and heavy lifting) to establish a culture of accountability (even "right people" can run astray if not held accountable). The good news is that holding others accountable can build positive momentum very quickly and top performers (the right people) thrive when they are given clear expectations and then held to them.

The challenges facing a leader, if seen as described above, differ depending on the number of people being led. The greater the number of people, the better a leader has to be at communicating direction, at picking the right team members and at holding others accountable for doing their part to move the organization forward. Consider this perspective when you next read one of the many books and articles on leadership.