A CEO Approach to Situational Leadership

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Abstract

During Jack Stahl’s twenty-six year CEO tenure with both Coca Cola and Revlon, he describes how he believes that situational is the best approach to leadership. After being coached by the former CEO of Coca Cola, Doug Ivester, on close attention to organizational detail, he finds it to be the most important part of leading any group. While teaching this to employees has taken considerable energy and many late nights, the tactic drives accountability and reduces micro-management. Also, by identifying key departmental experts and helping them understand the company brand, he embeds positive spokespeople for the organization. Having employees market the brand from within improves morale and creates a supportive workforce. Finally, Stahl’s approach to company initiatives is driven by the needs of its constituents.

A CEO Approach to Situational Leadership

After twenty-six years as a Coca Cola and Revlon CEO, Jack Stahl practices situational leadership as if it is second nature. His attention to detail and creative approach to leadership is discussed in the 2007 interview with *Strategy+Business*. He believes, “The best leaders are situational [and] able to step into any circumstance and recognize whether they need to engage at the strategy level or dive into the nitty-gritty” (Prewitt, p.2) Focusing on organizational detail, engaging unspoken leaders, and responding to the community are some of Stahl’s most utilized approaches.

**Train Others to Focus on Details**

Early in his career with Coca Cola, Jack Stahl was met with a valuable lesson from CEO, Doug Ivester when asked to develop a plan for public offering. Stahl had failed to pay attention to the details leaving out vital information in his proposal. Ivester worked throughout the night making sure Jack Stahl had a clear understanding of his expectations. Now, Stahl feels as though this was a pinnacle point in his career to understanding leadership. He says, “Everybody in an organization has got to be focused on details” (Prewitt, p.7). Once a leader is clearly able to establish expectations of details with their employees, they no longer needed to oversee every aspect of a project. Jack Stahl spent many late nights with employees, just as Ivester had done with him, but it reduced micro-management and increased accountability (Prewitt, 2007).

**Think Strategically about Branding**

It is important for any organization to distinctly understand the branding or the purpose of the product. At Coca Cola, they ensured every dime of the marketing budget was focused on their product branding to the public. However, according to Jack Stahl, there were several leadership opportunities within the company that he felt vital to the brand. He would talk to employees and find the undeclared leaders throughout the departments. These individuals had vast experience and had strong credibility amongst their peers. Stahl would pay special attention to these individuals ensuring they understood the branding of the product (Prewitt, p.12). Not only could these employees now see part of the larger picture, but also be positive spokespeople within the organization.

**Taking Company-Wide Initiatives**

When asked about making company changes to areas like global health, infrastructure, and environmental changes, Jack Stahl said he tackled them like any other change: he established the end goal and planned the steps necessary to get there. However, when it came to company-wide improvement initiatives he also found it very imperative to listen to the needs of those established as the company’s constituents (Prewitt, p.16) Identifying the role your company has in the community can help clearly establish what steps should be taken for improvement. Then, conveying such initiatives that improve not only the company but also the environment brands the company as a leader of the community.

**Conclusion**

Jack Stahl’s initiative to be a situational leader was proven effective and successful during his tenure as the CEO of Coca Cola. His determination to focus on details eliminated the need for micromanagement while still holding employees accountable. Stahl’s tactics to identify unspoken leaders and plant them as positive role models was a creative and efficient approach to leadership. Finally, the ability to take action on current constituent’s request and community concerns while still maintaining production proves Stahl’s situational leadership a success.

**References**

Prewitt, Matthew. (2007). The Situational Leader. *Strategy + Business*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.strategy-business.com/article/li00042?pg=all>