

Stretch your boundaries and explore other options to strengthen leadership

Debbie Nicol

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Intently listening to a chief executive's input at a recent senior forum, I flexed as his words caught my attention: "systems build complacency". Is this a true statement and if so, what is the leader's role when it comes to systems in the workplace?

Take an organisation's common systems: they include the procurement, training and the maintenance systems. These are a compilation of practices, standards, touch points, entry and exit points. Some systems are global in nature, incorporating international best practice, while others are home-grown, built to purpose and fit one establishment only. Some are automated, while others are manually administered. When built well, systems reduce negative side effects of inefficiency. So with all these positives, can complacency really creep in?

Complacency is a behaviour that occurs when the senses shut down, the mind and actions are on automatic pilot and the outlook for "possibility" shrinks into oblivion. Complacency exists when we accept "what is" as the only possibility. It has the highest chance of existence with roles based on keeping things the same, such as the majority of management roles.

In contrast, a leader's role regarding systems is to destabilise, challenge and find ways to take a system beyond, to the next level of "what can be", driven by need or desire. Most leaders flourish in the land of change and hence would, by nature, be searching for opportunities to upgrade systems at all stages.

So why do some leaders still not do this? Perhaps it's a case of having no authority to do so. Some systems may be centralised at a headquartered or controlled location. Safety and security systems are a great example. Or perhaps the innate behaviour of the leader has an overriding trust level, where continuous improvement is not sought as the system is trusted unconditionally. Regardless of the reason, becoming complacent with systems is a dangerous way to operate, inviting lost opportunity and allowing increasing inefficiencies.

For leaders who may be seeking ideas to chase away even the most remote chance of complacency, the following tips may help to destabilise current thinking:

Engage with your customers

Systems are built to serve businesses, which serve customers. So why not revisit the root of your business, the customer, and explore their wildest dreams? If they had the magic wand and could have anything they wanted in the services they buy from you, what would it be? What would it look like and how could you provide that?

Be a mystery guest with your customer system

A mystery guest is one that uses your products and services for an

indication of the user experience. It's not uncommon to hear around operational meeting tables comments such as "how did he get to that with our system?" or "why did he choose that option and not the correct one?" or even "how silly can a customer be?" Whether you like it or not, people will use systems according to their own capability.

Be a customer with an inquiring mind and see what your system allows a customer to do, that may result in wasted time or even a longer process than necessary. You may just be surprised by what you find. Even better, seek a team of volunteers to use it and observe their interactions. You may be blind to what is really going on.

Do some research – use other systems that provide the same service

We all have competitors. Research their systems and pretend to buy. Discover products and services out of your industry. Keep a notepad for each time you read about something that impresses you elsewhere to see how that idea could be adopted for your product.

Complacency is a dangerous state of affairs in the business world – so too are outdated and redundant systems. Challenge yourself and challenge your system; sit back and watch a whole new world of efficiency and effectiveness evolve.

Attend an international course within your area of operation

Some may feel they are beyond learning anything new, yet when we attend these courses which highlight best practice, it may well open minds to new ways. We don't know what we don't know, and the only way to know it is to seek it out, ask questions, listen and explore.

Leaders look for opportunity from every angle. Start with the end in mind and to avoid complacency, explore how your system serves that outcome. Stay alert, stay focused, stay connected to ensure your systems proactively evolve, rather than change reactively.

Debbie Nicol, managing director of the Dubai-based business en motion, is a consultant on leadership and organisational development, strategic change and corporate culture.

business@thenational.ae

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