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AVOIDING LEADERSHIP DRIFT

Business is an active, demanding endeavor. Only those who consistently apply themselves succeed. Organizations that thrive require leaders who actively dream, plan, engage, solve, pursue and network. It's a lot of work, and there's no finish line.

But no one can keep up the pace indefinitely. Every leader experiences profound peaks and valleys, seasons of being on track or feeling lost. Organizations flourish when their leaders are in sync and on their game, and they flounder when their leaders drift off course.

Leadership drift is increasingly responsible for management failure and turnover. Many leaders face forceful influences and events that detrimentally change them, diminishing their organizational influence and reputation. Drifting off course is a subtle process that can gradually steer leaders in the wrong direction.

All leaders experience drift at some point in their careers. The greatest danger is failing to recognize it and taking steps to reverse it. Prolonging a short stretch of drift can render it irreversible, leading to career and team failures. Fortunately, leaders can take concrete steps to prevent irrevocable consequences.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

As the word implies, "drift" is a loss of direction or purposefulness. Any pattern of behavior that reduces leaders' impact or influence is cause for concern. Leaders who have forgotten their core mission have drifted, explains Cornell University organizational-behavior professor Samuel Bacharach, PhD, in "How to Avoid Leadership Drift" (Inc.com, April 2016). Drifting manifests in a variety of ways, signaling that leaders have distanced themselves from their roles.

A message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are you in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?

In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "what got you here may not get you there."

At Proffitt Management Solutions we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

Find out how services such as individual or team coaching and development, motivational and skills workshops, seminars may help you better answer those 5 questions and benefit you...

Drift can be linked to a loss of interest or control. Expressing apathy toward current issues or projects is a discernible sign, as is coasting on past accomplishments. Drifting leaders often concede their principles or work ethic, permitting situations they never would have tolerated earlier in their careers. Adopting a hands-off management style commonly indicates that a once-diligent leader has drifted.

Leaders who isolate themselves from colleagues or resist feedback may have succumbed to drift. Shutting down, saying or contributing little, and making fewer decisions are red flags.

Just as a boat slowly drifts from shore, leadership drift slowly progresses and may be observed only after a significant occurrence. When employees begin to notice behavioral changes and wonder what happened to their once-respected leader, whispers become conversations. It becomes clear that leadership drift has been going on for some time. Drifting leaders eventually cause their organizations to veer off course, with potentially devastating implications.

WHY LEADERS DRIFT

All leaders endure impactful changes or trials. Troubling life events can profoundly affect one's behavior, mindset or motivation, notes Brigitte Tasha Hyacinth, MBA, in *Purpose Driven Leadership: Building and Fostering Effective Teams* (independently published, 2017).

Challenges often shuffle priorities and strain perspective on personal matters. A loss of a family member, marital crisis, health scare or financial calamity can turn a leader's world upside down, and one's focus can quickly blur. Leaders who lose their enthusiasm and determination find themselves drifting.

Alternatively, drift can follow a period of working too hard, for too long, and running on fumes. Burnout is a serious problem, leaving afflicted leaders with no gas left in the tank and no energy or desire to maintain the required pace. Self-preservation supersedes daily responsibilities and issues. Leaders who drift from exhaustion eventually become ineffective, and their role within the organization is compromised.

On the other end of the spectrum, drift may result from boredom. Leaders who are denied new challenges or goals will lose interest in, and enthusiasm for, their jobs. Bored leaders have no determination or satisfaction. There's little motivation to apply themselves to their tasks. They drift from their responsibilities, abandoning any concerns, and look for ways to escape ever-increasing monotony.

Leaders burned in the past by setbacks or failures may build resistance to risk-taking. Their guard is always up, and they settle into their comfort zones. Coasting is perceived to be the safer route, reducing stress and posing little risk to job security (or so they erroneously believe). Leaders who aim for comfort are assuredly in drift mode, unlikely to move their organizations forward with new programs or products.

Leaders who have experienced rapid success or advancement tend to become self-absorbed. Pride and privilege dull their sense of responsibility, and they issue directives that benefit themselves. If they see the organization as a vehicle for personal gain, they and their values have dishonorably drifted. Their actions will ultimately derail their organizations' efforts and their careers, and they'll wonder where they went wrong.

DRIFT'S DAMAGES

Drifting from one's appointed responsibilities has consequences for leaders, their people and the organization. Initial signs often go unnoticed. It's vitally important to spot them in time to prevent a prolonged drift that cripples the organization.

Leadership drift's most immediate effects hit the operations level. Leaders who lose track of their purpose and discount critical duties cede control and oversight, causing a variety of setbacks: missed deadlines, ruined efficiencies, costly mistakes and poor financials. Problems may emerge slowly, but they can cascade rapidly.

Operational stumbles are often accompanied by damage to human capital. When the machinery begins to groan, so do people. Setbacks and

challenges give rise to employee dissatisfaction, low morale and production deficits. Employee frustration compounds operational dysfunction, and the downward spiral continues.

Drifting leaders are likely to miss important tactical information concerning day-to-day happenings, which handicaps their decision-making abilities. When they make poor decisions and fail to perform due diligence, outcomes suffer—along with reputations.

Drifting leaders also miss opportunities. They forfeit their ability to make improvements, changes or corrections, especially when problems result from their lack of oversight. Missed opportunities tarnish leaders' legacies. They fall behind in dynamic activities and are left out of the planning and developing processes, further limiting opportunities.

Leaders who develop a reputation for trailing behind soon fall out of favor, and career prospects grow dim. Drifting is a common cause of leadership reassignment, demotion or dismissal. In their shortsightedness, drifting leaders often blame their environment, team or upper management for their misfortune. A qualified leadership coach can help leaders grasp the internal reasons for drift.

Drift's most unfortunate outcome is a loss of values, Hyacinth asserts. Conceding on excellence and accepting mediocrity lead to habitually cutting corners, justifying mistakes and lowering standards. The organization is ripe for failure, making victims of every employee.

CONQUERING DRIFT

"...progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road..."

~ C.S. Lewis

Drifting leaders rarely have an accurate picture of what's happening to (or inside) them, so the highest priority is a proper assessment by a trusted colleague, mentor or, optimally, a qualified leadership coach.

An honest evaluation offers observations, feedback and direction, allowing leaders to better grasp the reasons for drift. Qualified coaches can help leaders gain insight into its causes and develop strategies to correct it. Regular assessments are beneficial to tracking progress, tuning areas of difficulty and determining when the desired improvements are achieved.

When leaders understand drift's underlying issues, they can reclaim the passion they once had for their jobs. They'll remember what fueled the beginning of their careers and identify the moment when the shift toward drift occurred. They'll take stock of what they value and reassess what they want to do. Reevaluating career goals enables leaders to put drift in perspective and reestablish their purpose.

Leaders are wise to consider these motivational basics:

- We achieve satisfaction only by applying ourselves.
- We fulfill our roles by serving and enhancing others, not ourselves.
- Drift won't keep us safe or preserve our positions; rather, it drives our decline.
- We must catch and reverse any tendency to "check out" through continuous self-reflection and honesty.

Executive coaches have the tools to help leaders identify their susceptibilities and make corrections. Addressing problems early can help prevent full-blown drift.

Leaders must put drift in perspective by remembering who's counting on them. If they chose the leadership track to help people, they must give them the tools required to succeed, reject mediocrity, encourage high performance and be present—each and every day, without exception.

Drift is a leader's way of surrendering to dissatisfaction after sensing a battle loss. Leaders must fight the urge to withdraw, remain actively engaged and invested, and find the motivation to endure even the most challenging setbacks. Those who monitor their performance with an accountability system can successfully prevent, reverse and repair drift.