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INTERVIEWER:

I liked today's question, "If your organization was running absolutely perfectly, how would you know?" What were some of the things that you thought from today's session?

USHER:

The thing that I think most stuck out to me in terms of the question itself is the struggle that the group had with really getting a handle on whether – if an organization was running perfectly, how would they know? The concept of defining perfection, even when we moved away from the semantics of that and began to look at how would we personally feel, how would we assess, etc., everybody's approach to it was very different, and everybody's understanding of what it would mean for them personally was very unique. I think what that brings back to me or reminds me of yet again is that leadership isn't a cookie-cutter Management 101 or manual. Even when you have read all the books and know the theories, understand them intellectually, the application is driven by human factors that makes for a very challenging profile to ask what seems to be, on the surface, a very simple question.

INTERVIEWER:

It's possible to get fantastic results with a wide variety of management styles. Like you said, you can't just take it out of a textbook.

USHER:

We went through a litany of markers of what would be an excellent organization or what kind of activities would or wouldn't be happening in a perfect organization. And we can name them. We can list them. We can run through them to quite a good level of depth. But then turning to the mirror and saying, "How would I recognize that? How would I drive toward that? How would I implement that? How would I support the implementation of that in the teams below me?" – to say that they were hard to respond to is an understatement. I think people really struggled with saying, "How would I begin to really dig in to making those kinds of things happen?" Which of course is the magic and why so many books keep getting written. If somebody wrote the book on it and everybody was able to implement it, then there wouldn't be a need for a second book. I think it's not surprising that there are so many books out there as a result of this sort of very human factor of, "I understand the concept, but now help me to implement." It's a challenge.

INTERVIEWER:

You even posed the question during the conversation today. We all know these things, and your question wasn't, "We know them and we try and do them and we can't get consistent results." Your question was, "We know them. We don't even try and do them. And why don't we do that?" I thought that was an even more interesting question.

USHER:

Yes, it is. I think I agree. To go back and restate it, we do know what the right things to do are. We've read about them. People have dissected them to a high level of detail. Yet we don't implement them, and why is that? Some reasons are very practical and tactical. Stuff gets in the way. And others are a little bit more mysterious and have to do with a combination of experience and knowledge point and growth point and maturity. There's a variety of factors, I think, that really drive why we do and don't. Fear – we talked about fear. We talked about overload. We talked about a whole bunch of stuff. But I think the biggest reminder that I came away with today was, we are only human and we have all of the human reasons and rationales for not doing things and doing things that everybody else has. We just happen to be in a leadership role. And it

has greater implications when you either do or don't in terms of trying to move your organization from Point A to Point B.

INTERVIEWER:

We talked a lot about the human capital in an organization and how that drives results and organizational improvements. Talk more specifically about the leadership aspect of that.

USHER:

I think if you're talking about the fact that if we don't take an active role in moving the human capital elements into alignment with each other so that we can achieve what we're trying to achieve, then we in fact will not survive as organizations. We have to be able to think into the future about what it is that we're desiring to achieve and make sure that we have aligned our resources, which in this case largely are people resources, to achieve that. It's a very active component of successful leadership, yet it's one that we don't discretely carve out as nicely and tidily as we do with other elements of a traditional leadership portfolio such as marketing or finance or even strategy itself. We tend to see the human capital factor as the follow-on element. Theory comes first – the theory of finance, the theory of marketing – and then we say, “Oh yeah, and we need people to do that.” I think that that's a sequence that works to some degree. But if the human capital element is drawn into the picture sooner we're not just talking about theory but we're talking about theory and implementation in the same breath as co-joined steps. I think that that makes the difference in terms of applying the resources to the situation, to the desired outcome, in a much more joined-up, a more aggressive fashion, and I think that's where you see real examples of leadership, where they have welded the human element to the theoretical element and implemented them at the same time.

INTERVIEWER:

Your concepts about the theory of finance and the theory of marketing and so forth are left over from a time when people were just cogs in a machine. Back then business wasn't driven by human intelligence or creativity the way it is now in the knowledge economy with service businesses. It seems now that we're doing it backwards to not put people in the fore. How does one do that in an organization now, given the culture and the background?

USHER:

I don't know. I don't have the perfect solution to that. I wish I did, in which case I'd be on a beach somewhere retired with a bank account that would be fantastic. But I think it has to do with the concepts that we began to explore about the middle of the session today where we talked about the fact that, for example, people – or the knowledge economy – is probably already beginning to recede and we're in the synthesis economy, the economy of people on your workforce who aren't the finders of knowledge but the synthesizers of knowledge. It's taking their experiences, using their experiences, the knowledge that they bring, the knowledge that they can glean, and applying that to the situation at hand to move the chess pieces forward. It's not saying, “We have to move the chess pieces forward so we're going to do Move 4A.” We say instead, “We need to move the chess pieces forward. Team, help me figure out how to do that.” It's a much more participative process where elements of knowledge reside in the workforce and it's bringing together and asking and giving permission for those elements of knowledge to work simultaneously to move situations forward, to move progress forward, that I think is the difference.

How to do that is probably much more closely aligned to traditional old-fashioned concepts of leadership than we're willing to admit because we're in such a new modern age. But I suspect that concept of – if you look back at the key principles of what we historically have called great leadership – of being open to different approaches, being willing to give responsibility, holding people accountable for results but not telling them how to get those results. There's a lot more to be gleaned from that again in this sort of iteration of how workforces operate. It's almost a return to the past in terms of how to bring the best out of people at a time when you are almost totally reliant on people to move your business forward. It's not machinery anymore. It's people. And if you cannot empower them to act and do under the umbrella of where

INTERVIEWER:

you ask them to act and where you ask them to take you, then I think you're going to have enormous problems with the way the workforce cultures have evolved, with the way society is evolving. It's back again to saying how many of those historical principles of leadership are even more relevant today than they were as little as 10 years ago?

USHER:

You talked about the difference between "We're going to do Move 4A" versus "Team, help me figure this out." Do you then also take that thinking into, "Team, let's work with our customer base, our constituents"?

Yes. I think that's the thing that's probably most new in terms of this approach to leadership. There's no question that great leaders have always had a real tight finger on the pulse of what their customers wanted. Part of what's made them successful as leaders is that ability to first identify what their customers want, and then to be able to translate that into a service or a product. I think the difference in this day and age is that there are a lot of businesses who either are doing the same thing as you or can quickly come up to the point of doing the same thing as you in terms of providing for your customers. The commoditization factor has been incredibly enhanced by the speed of communication and information exchange. Company A comes up with a great idea, and before you know it Company B is in existence copying everything they're doing, having stolen their workforce. The commoditization factor is very strong.

What I think the differentiator will be in the future is not what do your customers need, but how can you help? In the work you're doing and the way you're leading your team, can you help your customer's team be successful with their customers? It's moving a generation further out, leaping that much further out and saying it's not providing something to my customer that I want to do. I want to empower my customer's people through the work I do. I want to empower their people to deliver to their customers. And it's by helping your clients, your customers, the companies you work with or for to extend their success ratio out to their client base or their customer base that's going to make the real difference. It's the ability to think one step beyond what's the service they need to what's the service that their customers need. I think that's going to be the huge differentiator.

INTERVIEWER:

That takes a certain kind of person, someone who can think about how other people are working and then use that to make their own decisions.

USHER:

It is the ultimate human capital investment to begin to understand what it is that the people you're working with need to do their jobs better. If you look at the leadership of your own people, it's what we've historically talked about of giving them the right tools, giving them the authority, and making sure they understand the mission. That's the first step in it. If you can't do it with your own people, then it's going to be much harder to take one step further.

In taking it one step further you have to go into the minds of your very own customers or clients and say, "What are they producing? What do they need? What can my people in producing or providing our service to them do to enhance their own – their next generation of services and products?" It's a challenge because it means that you have to first understand what it is your customer is trying to do for their customers. Then you have to think about what it is that your specialty or your provision is for your customers and then make the leap and help your own staff and your own people understand that in doing the work you do, you must do it in such a way that helps their clients and customers improve their services. That's a very interesting process because you have to come out of the process of selling your business to your customers. You have to come out of the process of managing your business on a day-to-day business. And you really need to move your mindset and your brain into that of your customers and say, "What are they trying to accomplish?" If you've got customers that are all over the map, that do all kinds of different things, it really requires not only a willingness to explore other industries and other ways that people provide services, but you have to look to others to help you understand and in a very quick way because you don't have a lot of time

anymore to get ingrained with those customers who love you and stay with you for 40 years. You have to do something different from them almost from the day you first meet them and get them thinking differently. When we go to a client and say, for example, we know that you provide cleaning services for customers in high security. What else can you do to make that process of what you provide them satisfactory? What bothers them? What are the barriers to delivering those services that you're experiencing? In the big wins you've had, in the big successes you've had, what's differentiated you from your competition? Now, let us take a step back and say, "How can we help you provide those differentiating factors by the services we provide?" That's a very different approach to helping empower people and a very different approach to human capital, and one that's critical. There are a lot of choices out there and the economy's tight. Whether the economy stays tight or not there's going to be a lot of choices out there because information and businesses can develop quickly. Information can be exchanged quickly. But getting the knack of making your customers more successful in what they do is going to be a real winner.

INTERVIEWER: If you can do that, there's always a lot of value there.


USHER: There's a huge amount of value there, and you can repeat it. My sense is, from the work that we've done so far, is that there's less variety in that than you would expect. Mostly you find that customers are trying to provide better customer service in whatever it is they're doing, or to provide a closer pairing of their services to the needs of their customers. Working in those two zones right there, just customer service and better pairing of services to need, if you can help in just those two, help your customers deliver on just those two areas, right there you've got a shoe-in on something that they're really struggling to crack. But in our world of human capital leadership, that is not a commodity. It's a skill set that is hard to develop. But boy, when you get it right it makes a difference in their world, and that's what we're trying to do, is make a difference in their world.

INTERVIEWER: There's huge potential for that, because as we've talked, the human capital aspect of companies is the last thing to be optimized or improved that can give you a competitive advantage. Everything else is already done.

USHER: Yes, exactly.

INTERVIEWER: We don't have to worry about how to get information anymore. Now the issue is how do we use it? We're back to the synthesis and the insight and the distilling, and then moving out to the workforce, to the people. Now what are you going to do differently?

USHER: It's interesting because I've talked, we've talked, almost exclusively in this interview about what you do within your own organization to help other clients and to help your clients extend their offerings more effectively. Of course, it all comes back to, "Are you running your own organization in an optimal way?" I think that there were a couple of real reminders of just how fragile and how complicated we are as humans in leadership roles. We're no stronger. There are always exceptions, but we're no stronger or different, really. We just have a slightly different wiring sequence, I think. But specifically, the concept of distilling my own list of "high-priority" items and really finding those high-priority items which are truly items that will have impact and focusing on those and not overextending myself, not overreacting to lesser-priority items, is one component which I thought was really interesting. We called it the concept of shedding – shedding some of the stuff that you really don't need, the undoing of the written laws, or the un-writing of the laws, is something that I think is really important. I've become increasingly committed to this concept of finding the right way to communicate the critical importance of human capital in the success of an organization, of managing the human capital, building the human infrastructure, in such a way that the company that you're running is distinguishing itself by the nature of how it manages its people and how its people deliver value to customers. I think really focusing in on how to articulate that to your own team, to your own leadership team, to your own staff, and ultimately to



prospective clients is really an important job that's been on my list buried amongst other things for a long time and needs just continual focus to bring it to some fruition. And back to the original question, if my company were running perfectly, how would I know? I would know because some of these things that feel like challenges would feel more like successful deliveries, successful outcomes. Now I struggle with how to talk about them, how to help other people see them, how to help people learn to implement them. For me, a form of success and a way to measure myself six months from now when we reconvene to look at this, is do I have more members of my team who are comfortable with this concept and who feel that the work that they do meets the objective of making our contribution to our customers, to our clients, one that makes their lives different and improves their outcomes.