Four Steps to Securing Your Leadership Mandate

Stop hiding your leadership light under a bushel. Achieving the legitimacy you deserve in your organisation entails a sequential process.

Unlikely though it may seem, an episode of the reality show Survivor from 2001 provides a salutary lesson for leaders everywhere. Two teams were marooned on a desert island to compete for a cash prize. Participants were ordinary folk who struggled in the harsh terrain. Thus, it was all the more surprising when both teams quickly voted out their only member with the survival skills needed. At the core lay allegations of bossiness and control-freakery when most wanted to work together as a team. This example shows that you can have the exact experience your organisation needs, know what needs doing, and be in the right place at the right time to make it happen. Yet this may count for nothing if you are ineffectively positioned to lead.

Over the years, I observed how a weak mandate can cause leadership to unravel, from cases in the public domain and privately with clients. I rolled all this experience into a fictional character, Jon. When he faces all-too-common dilemmas, four fundamental steps help secure his leadership.

1. Connect with authentic purpose

Jon was disappointed when his efforts were disregarded. Heading up HR with a seat on the board, he had the expertise and drive to get things done. But while his initiatives were technically sound, colleagues perceived they did not add up to much. It became obvious that neither the HR function nor Jon himself were highly rated. Disillusioned, he sought a coach, thinking he needed to develop influencing skill and gravitas. Surprisingly, the advice was to take a different course.

It started by helping Jon review his signature strengths and values. He realised that at heart he was motivated to be a transformational leader. The focus then turned to the core business and its outlook. Jon was guided to review the Board’s strategy with fresh eyes, and found it wanting. This led him to a bolder view on the trajectory of their evolving business, which re-defined HR as a guide for organisational changes to come.

Critically, Jon had pivoted from a functional to an enterprise mind-set. Previously, he viewed his company’s affairs through an HR lens – a form of tunnel vision that prevented him from seeing across the organisation. This shift helped him engage in collective decision-making with his board, often in a sense-making capacity where business change was involved. Instead of feeling marginalised, he grew motivated by the difference his leadership brought. While this did not happen overnight, without the critical pivot it would not have happened at all.

Jon had discovered the power of leadership.
alignment. This happens when you connect what you
stand for in business with your company’s core
value proposition. The more authentically the two
align, the more attuned you are to opportunity and
risk. Your reputation for smart sense-making
strengthens your leadership standing.

But what if that alignment doesn’t naturally occur?
What if discovering your inner purpose puts you at
odds with your board’s ethics, or your job’s basic
requirements? It’s the stuff of which mid-life crises
are made. You look up from years of busyness to
find the role you worked so hard for is no longer for
you. It’s hard to excel when your inner rudder tugs
your attention away. When this happens, consider a
move – you and the business will be better off for it.

Entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson succeed
by growing ventures in their own guise. In a viable
business with which you identify, if stated ways of
working reflect actual ways of working, and match
your way of leading, then you are in the right place
at the right time.

It does not mean you operate in an echo chamber,
however.

2. Grow perspective through cognitive diversity

Jon knew that diversity was increasingly for board
agendas, but the subject elicited low enthusiasm
from his fellow directors, whom Jon privately
perceived as “male and stale”. Nevertheless, they
agreed that senior levels should better represent
the rich mix of people within their business and
externally.

Jon had yet to learn that the real value lies in the
power of cognitive diversity: the differing ways
people think. There would be little gain if people
sitting around the board table looked different but
sounded the same.

This was indeed Jon’s experience. Having
previously felt on the periphery of his board, he
grew his understanding of the business so as to fit
seamlessly into its decision-making. Before long,
this HR professional realised it had become too
seamless for them all. There was a familiar pattern to
their discussions – who led, who concurred – with
insufficient fresh thinking or challenge to stimulate
their strategic view. While a firm strategy could be
insufficient fresh thinking or challenge to stimulate
their discussions – who led, who concurred – with
their perspectives, in order to

He reflected on diversity initiatives he had led as HR
Director, as well as board appointments and talent
pipeline with the nominations committee. Too much
of this had been HR-led, focused on activity rather
than outcomes anchored in the business. Thus,
initiatives had tended to adapt to the company as it
was, rather than develop the company forwards. No
wonder his initiatives had not been perceived to do
much for the business! He needed to establish a
future vision for their organisation which could
enable the growth ambitions of the board – and
perhaps aim higher still. He could use that
organisational vision as rationale and North Star for
initiatives to come.

Jon acknowledged that a bigger organisational
change was on the cards than the board
contemplated, and he would need to win their
approval.

3. Establish broad support for your leadership view

In developing an enterprise viewpoint, Jon’s
touchpoints and relationships had grown. People
became more inclined to share information, formally
and informally. Now he considered how to share his
proposal for organisational change. Not only must
the board agree to sponsor it, but the change would
affect them too and Jon anticipated some resistance.
He remembered how John Kotter encouraged
leaders of change to create a powerful guiding
coalition of senior colleagues whose authority and
support would boost a mandate to proceed. It
should also reach more junior individuals with vital
front-line experience and local credibility.

Resistance would inform your view.

In accordance with good governance, Jon’s board
routinely discussed stakeholder interests when
taking major strategic decisions. It made sense to
Jon to do the same for his proposed organisational
change: take account of key players and their
concerns, incentives, motivations, etc.

It was the first time Jon was initiating strategic
business change. While he had raised his
leadership profile, it was not yet strong. Again, he
received good if unusual advice. This was to also
assess those with a stake in his own leadership –
some of whom might not be immediately obvious.
For example, high potentials within the HR function
and employee opinion-formers. It would safeguard
him to consider their perspectives, in order to
increase positivity and minimise misperceptions
which could damage him and his agenda. Jon made
it a priority to strengthen his leadership standing
before proposing disruptive change to the Board.

4. Pay attention to the work style and culture

Remember the Survivor contestants, who were
rejected even when their skill was critically needed?
Their dominating behaviours shattered rapport with
their teams, rendering their position untenable. Jon
knew nothing about the game show but was keen to

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communicate in such a way as to bring in people behind him.

As an HR expert, he understood that in some companies there was a disconnect between the top echelons and everyone else. This often led to differing priorities and work cultures, as well as organisational misalignment. It called to mind Peter Drucker’s saying that culture eats strategy for breakfast. It meant that the levers for organisational change might not work when you pulled them.

As Jon was deciding how to present his change initiative to his board and sell it across the organisation, he received one last bit of advice. It was that the more your communications and behaviours contrast with those of your colleagues, the greater the risk your message will not land well. The exception is if you were appointed to bring about change, or there is urgent imperative for change. In that case, non-conformity would model your mission of making a definitive break with the past.

Jon felt he should consider the followers upon whom his leadership depended, connecting with their mindset and behaviours to lead from rapport. With disruptive change in mind, he would carry hearts as well as minds to secure his mandate to lead them.

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