

Setting the Agenda

by

Russ Bredholt, Jr.

In their book, ***“You’re in Charge—Now What?”*** Thomas Neff and James Citrin recount the time A. G. Lafley took over at Proctor & Gamble. It followed the forced departure of his predecessor, Durk Jager.

Within days of taking the job Lafley announced his priorities. Instead of a radical makeover, he concluded P & G needed to do better what it already did well. “The message was shocking in its simplicity. Everyone down the chain of command could understand it,” Neff and Citrin note.

Mr. Lafley’s priorities for P & G became the first installment of his leadership agenda.

A more recent example is the hoped for turnaround at General Motors.

Chairman and CEO, Rick Wagoner, has now set a few clear and easily understood performance targets. Wagoner laid out his agenda for North America at GM’s annual meeting. His four goals were simple and direct:

- Build great cars and trucks
- Revitalize sales and marketing
- Cut costs
- Fix health care

What’s an agenda?

A leader's agenda is a personal plan for guiding the organization. It's not a business plan in the traditional sense. An agenda is a set of themes and priorities requiring action and progress in a given period of time. The agenda includes the main message and identifies critical issues needing attention. (***Briefing for Leaders***)

“It’s not a plan or a strategy,” says Jeff Immelt, Chairman and CEO of General Electric. “It’s what you stand for, what you’re focusing on.”

What are the benefits of a leadership agenda?

1. *It clarifies the main message.* There was no question in the minds of those at P & G what was important to A. G. Lafley—they were going to find ways to sell more Tide.
2. *It provides focus.* For Rick Wagoner it comes down to this: GM workers need to make sure their attention and behavior are focused on one of the four goals leadership has determined to be crucial to GM's future.

One criticism against Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, was the globe-hopping and time spent on a long list of issues. The late Peter Drucker observed that effective CEOs pick two tasks and devote their energies there. When those tasks are done they don't go to #3. They make a new list.

3. *It's a filter for allocating scarce resources.* Human. Financial. Time. Communication.
4. *It improves organizational health.* An agenda designed for action and results creates a positive climate. If people know what's going on in the CEO's mind they know where to place their energies. There's no substitute for a sense of direction and a direction that makes sense.
5. *Provides accountability for results.* First, for the CEO. Then for everyone else. Call it follow-up, implementation or execution. It's all the same thing. Getting things done.

What does an agenda look like?

A more developed but concise leadership agenda contains the following:

- **The preferred future of the business.** It lists the building blocks of that strategy with the concept of the business at the center.
- **The main message of leadership.** What needs to be said by the leader to the employees? The stakeholders? The investment community? What simple message should cascade over all these constituencies?
- **The top priorities—with a clear no. 1.** What should get your attention? A. G. Lafley offered a few priorities—inside a clear and simple theme. It allowed his people to move ahead with purpose.

- **The critical issues needing attention.** Critical issues are barriers to achieving the goals. Sometimes they are within your influence. Other times they are not—like the weather. They can be financial, manufacturing, human resources, or governmental regulations. It's essential to have a common understanding of issues and how to deal with them in a timely manner.
- **Operational issues.** What, if anything needs changing or reorienting to support your direction? What groups need improved communication in the coming months? What rises to the top as the two or three things that must happen in the coming year?

Most people are not mind-readers. What's inside your head needs to be made known repeatedly and in different venues among a wider audience. A leadership agenda is a simple and practical way to improve the communication process vital to your success and that of the business.

For more information on how to set an agenda and to view a sample form, click here...

<http://www.strategist.com/leadershipagenda.html>



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