

# Successful Leadership Skills

*A Newsletter for Real Leaders*

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## Summer Doldrums

### BEWARE OF GURUS!

**An excerpt from our  
upcoming  
book on  
healthcare  
leadership -**

**Mike Stephens,  
Retired CEO of  
Hoag Hospital  
Newport Beach, CA**

### Summer Doldrums

The lazy days of summer. The dog days of summer. Lots of daylight. Hot nights. Great weather. Sunshine. Vacations. Family Activities. Ballgames. Picnics. Fun and frolic. The list goes on and on and we're sure you could add your own experiences to it.

It is no wonder we are often drawn into conversations about productivity around this time of year. We are often asked for tricks on how to maintain momentum during the summer quarter. Or, we often get the follow up question: How do I re-establish momentum coming into the fall?

We think the answers to both are found by using the same disciplines. In fact, our advice works all around the year. It just seems like we notice the need more in the summer (and probably at Holiday time as well).

There are three things you can do that will help you and your organization.

**First.** *It is absolutely crucial that you get and stay focused on the critical few priorities that are most valuable and important right now.*

In our past we worked with a CEO who had the belief that since he did not really know how much could be done, he would get the most out of his people by loading up their lists way past their maximum capacity. He just figured that good people working hard on an impossible list would get done the largest quantity of items. He thought he would get more output this way than if he just guessed at what the right capacity load should be. And he figured that if he really loaded things up even more in the summer he could counteract the summer doldrums by keeping the pressure on.

Not bad in theory. In practice it just did not work very well. It went wrong on a number of counts.

Emphasizing quantity so directly had a direct and negative impact on quality. Items often got checked off the list, but the work was often not done very well, and often had to be re-worked. Busy but not productive.

Since people figured out they could not do everything, they often guessed at what was most important... Or they worked on what was most fun or easiest. The result was near impossible integration with everyone working on uncoordinated tasks. Busy but not productive.

If they received a follow up on something they were not working on, they often dropped everything they were doing and started working on the new item. Their people felt jerked around and after a few of those it became clear that not much of anything ever got completed. It would not take many of these fire drills to completely ruin the summer quarter's productivity. Busy but not productive.

In reality, this approach also resulted in an unnecessary increase in stress levels in an already high stress organization.

What eventually helped this CEO and senior team was very, very precise agreement on which projects were first... Yes, prioritization! We called it 'brutal prioritization'.

**Second.** *It is absolutely critical that capacity be understood and managed. During times like summer and Holiday periods original planning must be reviewed and re-set to allow for the time that people will be away.*

In the case mentioned above, the solution would be only partly successful by setting the priority list if the CEO still would expect his list of 55 prioritized items completed without respect to rational capacity management.

This team had to learn to fight it out and to agree on not only what was first or second, but also where to draw the line. They all had to agree on what would be worked on and what would wait until later. Doing this once at planning or budget time is not enough. It has to be done over and over, and especially at those

times of year when time is taken away from the job.

But once they figured it out and practiced it year round, they saw a big reduction of stress and an increase in momentum. When summer and Holiday time rolled around they learned to schedule special sessions to address capacity taking into account vacation times and travel. More got done, no one had to feel guilty about being away, and stress was reduced because expectations were realistic.

**Third and Last.** *Eliminate perfection assumptions in your planning models.*

Whether it is financial planning, product development, strategic planning, recruiting, merger integration savings, capacity planning, your own work planning, .... You name it... We have found that organizations and leaders accept, or demand, or simply fall into the trap of assuming perfection in their planning cases.

It's probably not as important to dig into why this happens than to recognize it does happen and to work very hard to make our planning assumptions realistic.

If we do our prioritization work well, and try very hard to apply rational capacity management, it can all still come apart if our planning assumes that all elements will go perfectly and exactly as planned and in the optimum time and at the optimum cost. Nothing ever goes perfectly. Emergencies come upon us. Customers present immediate demands. Stuff happens.

We are not suggesting easy plans, nor are we suggesting not reaching for big outcomes. We are just suggesting that you face reality when you predict how long something will take, how much it will cost, and how many people will be needed, and how much time they really have to contribute to your tasks.

It can go to terrible extremes if not checked. I remember in our unnamed example above that a vice president was being pushed very hard about a project completion date. He tried very unsuccessfully to persuade senior management why more time would be needed. The interchange was an almost one-way conversation about how long each project element 'should' take. Eventually, I remember hearing something like... "If you can't get this done by then, I'll find someone who can." He was removed from his job. I also remember the replacement candidate saying

that he could deliver the project on time because he agreed the planning assumptions were 'sensible'. I also remember that the project missed the deadline and came in exactly when the original vice president said it would.

Obviously that was an extreme example, but it is meant to jar you into thinking about how much perfection you place or demand in your plans.

Difficult periods like summertime and Holiday time do not have to result in more stress, missed deadlines, and lost momentum. Remembering these three simple keys will help your organization stay on track.

### **BEWARE OF GURUS!**

If you are one of our clients you have most likely heard us utter these words.

Pretty strange words coming from consultants, but then we pride ourselves on being catalysts more than all knowing experts. You also might conclude that we disrespect gurus. Not true. If you have worked with us you know that we value developing deep and broad perspective around a problem as a necessary first step toward a solution.

It's true we probably are not in love with most celebrity CEO's and experts, but even they can give us valuable perspective. The fact is no one runs his or her organization by a book, even if it is a best seller.

But gurus and books can help us develop that deep and broad perspective we think is so important. Those perspectives, integrated skillfully with the wisdom and experiences of your team and the unique requirements of your organization does give you a pretty good chance that you can get to a positive and practical solution.

With that as an introduction, we are currently exploring our understanding of "highly effective teams" with one of our current clients and we are even leaning a bit from one of the good books written on this subject.

This month we'd like to share a bit from [The Wisdom of Teams](#) by Katzenbach & Smith as a way of broadening your perspective. It is easy for us to do so because we just happen to agree with these particular ideas. In fact, if you'll let us know that you consider this helpful we'll consider including guru reviews in the future from time to time.

The authors start out by sharing some commonsense findings and that is as good a place as any for all of us to start.

They share that it is a *demanding performance challenge* that tends to create a team. This challenge is much more important than team-building exercises, special incentives, or perfect team leaders. Often teams form on their own around these challenges without any help or direction from management. The other side of the coin is that potential teams that have a performance challenge usually never become teams.

We could not agree more with a second finding. It is that a disciplined application of *team basics* is frequently overlooked. Team basics such as size, purpose, goals, the teams wisdom and skills, approach, and accountability really do matter. Paying attention to these issues do not alone deliver your outcome, but ignoring them will certainly impact the team's success. And frankly, most teams ignore many of them.

A third finding is that most organizations *prefer individual to group accountability*. This is tougher one to deal with. IOSI is very big on accountability. We think a lack of clarity around accountability is a very big issue in most healthcare organizations. But the reality is you are probably going to need a team to solve that really difficult problem. So we are all going to have to deal with the discomfort that conventional wisdom generates because of our orientation toward individual ownership and accomplishment. Gee, how about really clear accountability of purpose and outcome for the entire team!

A final finding that we'll share is that *Teams at the top are most difficult*. This is where we make our living at IOSI and we can attest that it is true. But once again, we would suggest you have no choice but tackle the challenge head on. The realities of facing short term expectations at the same time as long term needs, too many #1 priorities, completely packed calendars, and ingrained individualism all contribute to the degree of difficulty. And frankly, conventional wisdom expects hard charging executives to act in a way that often conflicts with effective team performance.

The fact is that with the proper understanding, focus, persistence, effective process and will, every one of these findings can be addressed in order to improve the probability of success for your team.

### **An Excerpt From Our Upcoming Book On Healthcare Leadership**

**The healthcare industry is one of the most complex in the world. We can all benefit from the insights from successful leaders in this business. We are working on a book to do just this. Each month we will share a pearl of wisdom.**

When we caught up with Mike for our interview, he had just retired after many years of service to Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach, CA. Although not currently in a CEO chair, we thought his career long perspectives shouldn't be missed.

We asked Mike about managing leaders in a complicated hospital environment and guiding the creation of the right environment.

*"First I tried to share my philosophy..... and hopefully they would adopt the same perspective. They may not have embraced it to the same extent I did, but at least when we talked with each other about issues and challenges there was a common understanding that really prevailed.*

*In so many things I think it is what you do to influence or persuade senior executives to do their work that really defines how you touch the organization. I've never felt I could carry an organization by personal magnetism. Its just not in my DNA and would not be realistic. But I could touch the people that worked for me. We could develop a strong sense and clarity around our work, what is important, what are our values....and what we have come together to do. We had to reach agreement on how and what we would execute.*

*I think that's the way you influence an organization. People will look at you from afar and recognize you have some influence, but only to the extent that you are validating the right things that your team is doing."*

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