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# You Can't Scale Trust

Thoughts on leadership  
by Karl Pister



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In one week I had two almost identical situations present with coaching clients. Both of them, from different organizations and academic and professional backgrounds, have similar situations.

The situation is the following:

Each of them has created a highly functioning team, both in a medical setting, that produces superb results, consistently, over time. This has come to the attention of regional and national leadership, since the results are exemplary.

And the ask, although from different organizations, is the same:

Would you be willing to scale this success to an organizational level? Since you have done it once, so successfully, can you take this 'on the road' and help other parts of the organization to succeed as you have?





Now that sounds, on the surface, to be a very logical request. However, as I spoke with both of them, who don't know each other, their comments were strikingly similar. Comments such as:

*The success we have had has taken years to establish*

*The success we have had is due to the team and our success with each other*

*The success we have had is not due to me* (which I disagree with to a large degree with both of them since they are unifying leaders that truly could teach how to do this; however, I do see their humble point).

Stephen Covey, in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, referred to what he called The Law of the Farm. Others have phrased it as the Law of the Harvest. To review, it is basically that you reap what you sow and you cannot rush the harvest. If you plant a pumpkin seed, you look at the back of the seed packet and see that it takes, depending on the variety, anywhere from ninety to one hundred twenty days to come to harvest. Now you can force the plant in a laboratory setting, but the stem will be weak and it will most likely not be a harvestable plant. You can't rush some things.

There are certain similar situations within the realm of leadership.

There is a common phrase when trying to develop a line of thinking or action that most of us have heard.



“You just need to get buy-in”

Buy-in, as it is so often used, in my view, is a cheap replacement for the foundational actions that build trust that are the underpinning of great success. Buy-in usually is requested in an hour-long meeting where the agenda is set, the explanation driven home, and the participants encouraged to get on-board with an already decided destination in mind. Great by the end of the meeting, but not so encouraging if the statistics of successful change initiatives are reviewed.

I am fully aware that some of these buy-in situations are imperative for corporate survival. But no amount of pushing an agenda seems to overcome the human factor of trust and followership. Most will follow a good idea for a while, but when the pressure comes to conform over the long-term, the behavior will regress to the pre buy-in stage.

“Scaling trust” is almost an oxymoron, unless great care is taken. As my surgeon colleague mentioned, sustainable trust can only happen on the local level with what he called “local champions”. And local champions cannot be placed by corporate edict. They have to be known to their people, have an established track record of integrity and delivering on what they have promised.

So what is senior leadership to do when such great ideas are available on a local level and they want to see it on the regional and national level?

Let’s return to the pumpkin seed.



It will take its time. But some things can be done to start the local champion concept:

There has to be trust in the senior leadership that is sanctioning and promoting the project. Their word counts and people notice when it actions don't meet words

The people have to see the leaders. While Zoom, email, and other types of communication have become necessary in some settings in our remote/hybrid world, the majority of healthcare is still face-to-face, which is an enormous advantage.

The leadership must pay scrupulous attention to what the front-line is needing. If there is a desire to scale these types of successes, it must be on the shoulders of the five key items noted by the leadership pioneer Tom Peters. Although I have noted them multiple times, they bear repeating:

- Find great people
- Hire them
- Find out what they need
- Get it for them
- Get out of their way

And this must be applied even when crisis hits. It cannot be a flavor of the month. It has to be sustainable.

This is what these two leaders have done in their microcosm of their unit and hospital. It can be scaled, but only in a summation of efforts of well-supported, local



champions that are leading people who extend trust and effort because they have seen trust extended by their leadership.





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