Culture + Talent

Leadership Under Pressure: Inside the Executive Office

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A first-hand perspective on why pressure at the executive level is mounting.

Today's leaders are walking a path filled with greater obstacles and more frequent hurdles than ever before. The previous top-down management style is no longer keeping up with a global business climate requiring agility and innovation.

The Steelcase Global Report: Engagement and the Global Workplace revealed that one-third of employees in 17 of the most important global economies are disengaged. Yet, traditional leadership patterns remain. The Global Report found that 58 percent of executives still work in private offices compared to only 23 percent of employees. While leadership environments such as executive suites remain the norm, Steelcase found that many leaders are taking advantage of technology and mobility to work outside of their traditional office. They know they can't afford to be isolated from employees who have their fingers on the pulse of the everyday challenges and opportunities in the organization.

These leaders are looking outside of their office doors and their company walls to gain greater understanding about how to engage employees and propel their organization forward. Over the course of two years, Steelcase researchers and designers interviewed executives and observed their work behaviors to understand what obstacles they face and how they need to work differently.

Much of what Steelcase's team was able to identify is echoed by Tom Henschel's first-hand experience. Henschel has spent every day of the the last 16 years counseling Fortune 500 executives as a leadership coach and founder of Essential Communications. In the last five to 10 years, Henschel tells us, he too, has noticed the growing pressure on executives pushing them to explore new ways to lead.

MOVING FAST

These days there's no taking the foot off the gas. Even companies ahead of the pack can face a course-altering disruption from a start-up they may not have even heard of yet. To respond to today's economic expectations, leaders need to recognize opportunities for innovation in the workplace and create a culture in which it can flourish.

For those companies reporting to Wall Street, the economic pressure comes quarterly without fail.



“Leaders have to make the company look good in 90 days… There’s a hair-on-fire feeling all the time.”

TOM HENSCHEL | Founder and Principal Consultant of Essential Communications

This need for agility and speed adds to the mounting pressure executives feel not to squander an opportunity. In an effort to stay in tune with all aspects of the business, Steelcase researchers identified leaders trying to cope with “infobesity.” They can’t count on information always making its way up the chain of command, but they can’t know everything. Leaders have to find a balance between being accessible and visible and figuring out how to sift through immense amounts of information to find what’s of value.

GLOBAL INTEGRATION

The challenge surrounding globally distributed teams creates yet another stressor. While global perspectives and talent acquisition offer opportunities to add highly skilled workers with new ideas to the organization, the need to engage global teams adds yet another demand for time to an executive’s already jammed schedule.

Steelcase researchers discovered the breadth of the work leaders are doing is resulting in rapid context shifting. Executives move from engineering to communications or human relations to supply chain management in minutes. In some cases, they have to mentally switch from one culture to another in very little time. This pace requires a mental reset for each new meeting in their busy day.

Henschel sees the result of this frequent cognitive gear-shift exacerbated when it comes to global demands.

“The simplest thing I notice from people on global teams are, they’re exhausted,” said Henschel. His clients describe waking up to actionable emails in the morning. Not just perfunctory notes, but real work that got done the night before and was sent for follow up and review. Global teams have late night calls, early calls and leaders are expected to travel to those offices several times per year.

CONNECTION CASUALTY

All that mobility, time zone hopping and schedule juggling takes its toll. And, while new technologies allow leaders to work from anywhere, Steelcase researchers found a casualty is the loss of connection with people including employees and their executive peer group.

Finding ways to maintain those relationships is not only necessary to run a successful business, it can stem turnover as well, according to Henschel.

He says millennials are ramping up the pressure on leaders everywhere because if they aren’t happy, they will leave. Some companies are already seeing the impact of high turnover and culture clashes. If connections are compromised and employees feel like they are just following orders, Henschel says, their jobs may lack satisfaction.

“Everyone wants to feel like they’re making a difference,” Henschel explained. “I think engagement equates to relationships. The old adage is still true, people don’t leave their jobs, they leave their bosses.”

SPACE AS BODY LANGUAGE

One way to communicate is through the use of the built environment. Many leaders don’t recognize what the space around them communicates about their organization’s desired culture.

“Space is the body language of an organization, it’s a way to communicate and a way to provoke desired responses.”

JULIE BARNHART-HOFFMAN | Steelcase Senior Design Researcher

The two year research project conducted by Steelcase revealed many leaders believe the traditional private office is essential for them to do their jobs citing the need for handling confidential information, but also for being a place where people come together.

Yet, the iconic executive office, can reinforce hierarchy and a top-down power structure. To identify new solutions for today’s leaders, Steelcase is embarking on a living experiment within its own walls. A new leadership prototype has been built around key design principles meant to foster an adaptive culture.



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Rebecca, an Emmy-winning journalist, reports on global research impacting the places where people work, learn and heal. Over her career, Rebecca spent 17 years covering local and national news events on television and a variety of digital platforms. She directed a digital news group in Kansas City for three years before becoming news director in Grand Rapids, Michigan for more than five years. Prior to Steelcase, Rebecca worked with one of the four largest media groups in the United States to coordinate news coverage among 48 newsrooms from the east to west coast.