

Case Study-Design for America:
Driving Strategy through Empowering Others

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23 March, 2019

Abstract

In today's global culture, context matters. It is the premise of this paper that what leaders do and how they do it drives organizational contexts at various levels. Recasting leadership and rethinking leadership development is essential to putting future leaders on a corporate path. The implications for leadership development hinge on how organizations develop the skills necessary to provide contextual leadership skills across the board. To critique how the leaders at Design America implemented, maintained and impacted their stakeholders utilizing their Strategic Leadership type, focuses on context. Explicating the practice of leadership as an inherently contextual performance, this paper offers an approach to the understanding of leadership work and suggests the value of this approach in providing a rich resource of information on the development of contextual leadership and incubating leadership. The role of the incubating leader frames contextual leadership at Design for America. It is the premise of this paper that what leaders in organizations do and how leaders do it is based on organizational contexts at various levels and the ability to serve as an incubator.

Abstract: contextual leadership, strategic leadership, incubator, stakeholders

Design for America: Driving Strategy through Empowering Others

This study aims to critique how the leaders at Design for America implemented, maintained, and impacted their stakeholders utilizing their specific Strategic Leadership types. Addressing the interface between the demands of an organization's different stakeholders in the context of leadership is important. The changing global climate demands that views of leadership change- both to meet business challenges today and to reflect leadership approaches that will work in the future. Developing contextual leadership meets the challenges of the changing global economy. This paper examines aspects of contextual leadership through the eyes of several theorists (e.g., Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Bass, 1985).

Olson and Simmerson (2012) define the strategic leader as the individual who - regardless of role, position, or title- intentionally takes advantage of opportunities to think strategically, influence others toward a chosen course of action, and garner needed buy-in, commitment, and advocacy (p. 52). Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington (2008) define stakeholders as the people or small groups who depend on the organization to fulfill their own goals and on whom, in turn, the organization depends. Stakeholders are the people who will ultimately estimate the success or failure of an organization.

On the subject of Contextual leadership, Mayo (2005) maintains that great business leaders possess more than important traits like charisma and an appetite for risk. They have contextual intelligence- a profound ability to understand the Zeitgeist of their times and harness it to create successful organizations. The environmental factors that they operate in create a specific and sometimes unique context for business. Within this contextual framework, some individuals envisioned new enterprises or new products and services, while others saw opportunities for maximizing or optimizing existing businesses, and still, others found

opportunities through reinvention or recreation of companies or technologies that were considered stagnant or declining (pp. 67-82)

Mark (2017) theorizes that in general, historical theories of leadership have made certain assumptions regarding the nature of reality. They have focused primarily on trait-based perspectives that address interpersonal dynamics outside the influential realm of situational forces. In contrast, a contextual model of leadership embraces the role of leadership as a framing force of our individual and collective perceptions concerning the broader influential situational setting. This approach to understanding leadership employs a socio-cognitive approach, where social cognition explains both the perception and mental processing of social phenomena and the effects of social factors on perception and mental processing. Within this model of leadership, the reality is no longer a set condition within nature, but rather a perceptual outcome influenced by our relationship with each other. Leadership effectiveness, to a considerable context, is now dependent upon context. Change the relative context also changes what is experienced and seen as effective leader behavior.

Professor Liz Gerber at Design for America (Olson & Simmerson, 2012) used contextual knowledge to drive her organization to success and incubating leadership to empower her students. She focused on empowering her students, encouraging them to bring passion and a confidence that they can try things and do things that they have not done before (Olson & Simmerson, 2012. P. 148). Today, leadership is less about being the best than about creating a context in which others can succeed. The leaders at Design were able to implement, maintain, and impact their stakeholders utilizing their specific Strategic Leadership types in the following way:

1. Disrupting with diversity – ensuring that the organization has a continual infusion of new perspectives – that its people are immersed in, rather than protected from, the

complexities of today's world – and that there is an appreciation of the value of diverse points of view

2. Asking great questions – framing the challenges facing the business in ways that are evocative and inspiring – ways that invite the broad organization to invest in creating innovative solutions
3. Conveying meaning required to tap discretionary effort – understanding what makes being part of this organization special, why people choose to work here, and what we must provide in return to maintain their commitment and passion for the work at hand.

Conclusion

Finally, Professor Liz Gerber coupled contextual leadership with the attributes of an incubating leader. For example, she encouraged others to focus on projects that address meaningful problems that excite other people. She thought very critically about this, demonstrating a bias for problems that would be easy for people outside the organization to understand and that the team was likely to be able to tackle in a meaningful way. This action helped the students build credibility for their work by assuring in advance that their ideas would address issues people would care about. This reflects one of the critical actions of incubating leaders (Olson & Simmerson, 2012, p.148-149) including the development of relevant social networks that could help the students succeed, the lending of assets like her expertise and the visibility that Design for America could bring to good ideas, and finally the development of a robust support ecosystem through tools like the Digital Loft. The focus of the incubating leader concentrates on defining personal success from the success of others—a good description of what Liz and Design for America have been able to accomplish (2012, p. 149).

References

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