



SOUNDVIEW Featured Book Review

www.summary.com

Leadership Lessons for the Realistic Optimist

Review by Chris Lauer

STRAIGHT A LEADERSHIP: ALIGNMENT, ACTION, ACCOUNTABILITY

by Quint Studer

Copyright © 2009 Studer Group, LLC.
Fire Starter Publishing. 264 pages, \$28.00,
ISBN 978-0-9840794-1-4.

The title of best-selling author Quint Studer's latest book on leadership in the healthcare field could have easily been *The Realistic Optimistic*. With *Straight A Leadership*, Studer continually advocates level-headed optimism as well as a realistic perspective on organizational leadership. He also explores the idea that great leaders must be adept at shifting from "long-term optimism to short-term realism." By showing leaders how to do this quickly, he helps them keep up in the rapidly changing field of healthcare as it is being bombarded every day with more and more changes.

Humility is another key ingredient in Studer's prescription for better leadership because acknowledging weakness is an essential skill for people who want to grow. Being humble also helps leaders build the trust they will need to implement the best practices that he proposes throughout the book. Adaptability is also a major part of his recipe for leadership success in the healthcare field. Without it, a leader will probably just keep doing the same things in an industry that is undergoing more change these days than just about any other field. With an underlying foundation of realistic optimism, humility and adaptability, leaders will have a better chance at transforming the

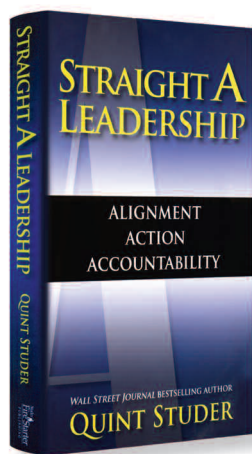
valuable strategies, tools and tactics Studer prescribes in his book into growth and success.

Beyond Titles

Studer continues to rise above his titles. As the CEO and founder of a world-renowned coaching company, he continues to make a name for himself in the health-care field by helping leaders implement systems and practices for better results. By staying on the cutting edge of organizational improvement, Studer has proven himself to be a valuable corporate adviser and executive coach. While helping leaders improve their businesses, he has become a master of gathering and spreading best practices from hundreds of organizations and thousands of other leaders. In fact, he has been so successful as a hunter, gatherer and transmitter of great ideas that *Inc.* magazine named him a Master of Business. When he received this honor, he became the first recipient of the award who works primarily in the healthcare field.

Studer has also been recognized internationally for his first book, *Hardwiring Excellence*. With more than 350,000 copies sold so far, it has become one of the best-selling leadership books ever written about the healthcare field. His second book, *Results That Last*, is also a best seller.

The primary obstacle that Studer aims to help leaders tackle with his suggestions and ideas in *Straight A Leadership* is the leadership crisis that is taking place within many of the best healthcare organizations. The problem, he explains, is not a shortage of a workable plan. The real problem is the difficulty of executing that plan since it has become harder and harder for health-care organizations to face changes in the external envi-



ronment. Internal operations must be brought into line with those changes while also being made more flexible so leaders can deal with those changes every day.

Consistency

One of the main points Studer makes throughout his book is that healthcare leaders need to get on the same page. They need to create a cascading communication channel that moves all ideas and information throughout the company. Nobody can be left out, because gaps between executives, middle managers and employees create the types of misalignment that crumble organizations. The key to a great system of communication is consistency, Studer writes. To keep results predictable and people throughout the system working toward the goals set by top leaders, a consistent approach is vital. Consistency creates collaboration and coordination, which is how better results are built.

How do you get all of the leaders in an organization on the same page?

Alignment. This is the first “A” on which Studer focuses in his book.

Alignment

When Studer writes about alignment, he’s talking about connecting the dots within your organization. The best way to do that, he explains, is by always looking at your organization as “a continuous performance improvement process.” In other words, you should always be striving to be better than you are right now. Healthcare organizations can never rest on their laurels. Since new technologies will always be important, great employees will always need raises to keep them on board, and new equipment will always be necessary, healthcare organizations are always fighting an uphill battle. Standing still is not an option. Staying the same in a turbulent industry, Studer explains, simply means getting worse.

That’s why leaders must always be working together toward common goals. One way to do that is by creating systems through which top leaders can obtain and send information to supervisors and managers, who will then spread that information to their people. Newsletters are a great way to share ideas, Studer writes, but they must be done correctly. A poorly executed company newsletter can become a dull photo op for senior leaders, or a place to dump disconnected information. On the other hand, a well-executed company newsletter connects the dots for everyone in the organization by not simply mentioning the external environment, but

describing how those in the organization can respond to outside events. Success stories about role models can help employees feel that they are empowered to take action. Another way leaders can use a newsletter to connect the dots within their organization is by sharing it with their direct reports. When employees see that their boss is sharing the newsletter’s articles and information in his or her rounds with staff, they will recognize its importance.

Other effective tools for promoting alignment include company bulletin boards and employee forums, Studer writes. A communication board can connect people to the organization as well as its external environment by exposing everyone to recent data, news and studies that pertain to their jobs. Employee forums can also be used to explain changes in the external environment, share ideas, discuss plans and provide new perspectives. Through stories about successfully conducted employee forums,

Studer shows leaders how these meetings can help them gain support for their initiatives while also obtaining new ideas about ways to improve their organizations.

Action

All of the alignment in the world is not going to do much good for your organization if you and your people fail to take action. This is the second “A” in Studer’s recipe for leadership success. Execution is essential to becoming a high-performance healthcare organization. To help healthcare leaders improve how they focus their actions, Studer presents his coaching company’s performance assessment. By completing the Studer Group’s assessment, leaders can learn where they are performing at their best, and where they need to improve. The survey not only helps leaders document where they are today, but it also helps them set realistic yet challenging goals for the future, devise better systems for performance counseling and address performance issues.

Some of the most important things that leaders need to do, Studer writes, is “deal with low performers, move middle performers up and reward high performers.” Without a system in place that charts how well people are doing their jobs, he adds, an organization will soon find itself filled with low performers at all levels.

Accountability

The best way to avoid this tragedy is to create the third “A” in Studer’s prescription for better performance: Accountability. No organization is going to improve if its people are not held accountable for their

All of the alignment in the world is not going to do much good for your organization if you and your people fail to take action.

work. The solution to the problem of low-accountability is leader evaluations, Studer writes. Getting people to sign a “Standards of Behavior” contract is not enough, he adds, since most organizations these days have their people sign these contracts, and very few are performing at higher levels.

A leadership assessment is a better way to find the gaps between leaders’ knowledge and the organization’s ability to tackle tough challenges from the external environment, Studer explains. When that gap is evaluated, solutions can be found and the gap can be bridged with new learning and behaviors.

Assessment

The first part of *Straight A Leadership* delves deep into the 16 questions of the Studer Group organizational assessment by working through each of the questions and providing insight into the types of information that an organization can gain by answering them. For example, the first question asks a leader to define his or her role. This information can help the organization find out what top executives, managers, doctors, department directors and other groups feel about their roles and the direction of the organization.

Once leader groups are identified, then the rest of the information that the assessment brings to the surface can be better understood. For example, the second question on the assessment asks respondents to list the “top three things your organization does well and should continue to do.” Studer presents a sample grid from one organization that demonstrates how different the perspectives of leaders can be. For example, all groups list “quality of care” as something their organization does well. But the groups diverge from there, with senior leaders focusing on financial performance, physicians focusing on educational opportunities and managers focusing on patient safety. This wide variety of responses demonstrates the dramatic differences between what senior leaders see in their organizations and what others judge to be important.

Closing the Gap

Similarly, when leaders are asked to look at what they would improve in their organizations, most leader groups from one sample survey list communication and accountability as areas where there are opportunities for improvement. Studer points out an interesting theme that occurs when the responses of senior leaders are compared to those of their managers and supervisors: Senior leaders are less likely than managers and supervi-

sors to list communication as a top area for needed improvement. This could mean that top leaders see themselves as terrific communicators while their underlings see greater room for improvement in that area.

By encouraging their leaders to take the survey, organizations can get a deeper sense of where they should focus their efforts and actions. By seeing the gaps between what an organization wants to do well and what it views as lacking, any organization can find better ways to close real and perceived gaps between each of its groups of leaders. When the distance between leaders’ perceptions and reality decreases, Studer writes, organizational performance increases.

Studer’s assessment also draws out the barriers to improvement that prevent an organization from moving forward. By showing leaders how to analyze results, he helps them overcome obstacles. For example, when the assessment reveals

problems with how people spend their time, Studer takes that information and shows leaders how they can improve the productivity of their people. If you think you are wasting your time in too many dull meetings that seem to get nothing accomplished, Studer writes that your problem might not be your number of meetings. Maybe your meetings are just poorly led. Studer suggests creating a more efficient standardized meeting template. Training your leaders to facilitate meetings better can also help, he adds.

Battle Mediocrity

As an industry insider, Studer understands how difficult it is for organizations and people in the field to perform at the top of their games. But he also understands how vital it is that they do so if they want to continuously improve. That’s why he offers leaders some helpful advice for dealing with all of the different types of performance they will encounter while struggling through good and tough economic times. He explains that there are three types of conversations that leaders will need to have with their people.

The first kind of conversation is with high performers. He reminds leaders that these are the people who they want to keep, so leaders must always be re-recruiting them. To keep them involved and interested, Studer writes, ask them to mentor others to pass along their skills. Help them see that they are part of a winning organization during one-on-one coaching sessions, and be specific with all feedback. Learn what you can do to keep them around. Giving them more

Senior leaders are less likely than managers and supervisors to list communication as a top area for needed improvement.

responsibilities or better opportunities can encourage them to stay, he adds.

The second type of conversation leaders must have with their people is with middle performers. These people, who make up the majority of employees, must be made to feel that they are valuable parts of the organization, Studer writes. The more specific you can be with your feedback, the better. To help middle performers move up to the ranks of the high performers, help them grow by setting up professional development programs. This will demonstrate your commitment to them as well as your belief that they can improve. When they feel good about themselves and the organization, Studer adds, they will be more motivated to get better at their jobs.

Poor Performers

The most difficult conversations leaders must have are with low performers. Although these people usually make up about 8 percent of the average workforce, Studer writes, they often take up a much larger percentage of a manager's time. You don't want these people to drag down your middle performers. That's why Studer encourages leaders to get good at the tough conversations that are required to move these people up or out of the organization. Don't let these people blame others for their shoddy work, or use their personal problems as excuses. Go to Human Resources to discover what options are available when dealing with these low performers, Studer suggests. He writes that one way to get better outcomes is by using the "D-E-S-K Approach":

- **D**escribe the poor performance.
- **E**valuate processes, steps, procedures and standards not followed.
- **S**how what needs to be done and how.
- **K**now the consequences of continued low performance.

Deadlines for performance improvement will help you follow up on low performers, Studer explains. When somebody refuses to improve, consider termination.

External Environment

The key to continuous improvement and "Straight A's" is staying tuned in to the external environment, Studer writes. This basic leadership trait is vital to a leader's ability to adapt to industry and organizational changes. That's why he dedicates so much of his book to advocating better ways for leaders to remain vigilant about how the external environment is affecting the organization's actions and goals. By showing leaders how to connect their daily operational tactics to a regular influx of information from the external environment, Studer helps leaders stay in line with the realities they must face today and the challenges that the future will undoubtedly bring.

How can a leader stay connected to the external environment? Studer describes many ways. For example, leaders can create scouting reports with which they track their people and determine who should be recognized and what issues in the organization need to be addressed. Rounding for external environment issues is another best practice that can help a leader gather more information than can be found by simply waiting for information to filter its way up the organization's hierarchy. Regarding rounding, Studer offers this tip: Capture the information that is found while walking among your people. A "rounding log" can help you keep track of any issues that get brought up during conversations with employees.

With many suggestions like these, and hundreds of examples from the real world to back them up, *Straight A Leadership* goes beyond best practices by walking healthcare leaders through the steps that will lead them to high performance. With positive encouragement along the way, and numerous tools for building a sturdy organization that is firmly planted in the realities of the external environment, Studer's latest book offers leaders the principles that can help them succeed. With an optimistic long-range vision that also maintains a realistic perspective on short-term goals along the way, Studer's expert advice provides valuable help where and when it is needed most. ●

The author: Quint Studer is founder and CEO of the coaching firm Studer Group. He is also the author of *Hardwiring Excellence* and *Results That Last*. Studer was chosen on two occasions by *Modern Healthcare* as one of the 100 Most Powerful People in Healthcare.