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Pigtails: The Unfinished Business of Leadership

By Mike Trammell

In 1979, I remember walking into a new, beautiful country manor. The two-story foyer was painted in Williamsburg Blue with a curving, rising stairwell on the left side.

And, in the middle of this grand foyer, hung a pigtail – not a grand chandelier or a builder-grade candelabra, but a bare 150W light bulb dangling from two or three wires that emerged from the smooth, flat white ceiling.

I was told that a chandelier had been ordered during construction, which was to be the centerpiece of the foyer. But as the house was being completed, the fixture was backordered. When the home was finished, the family moved in, but the fixture never arrived.

Over time, the family grew accustomed to the pigtail; in the everyday bustle of life, it became acceptable. And so, the pigtail remained, a chandelier was never hung, and the owner's vision was never completed.

As many construction entrepreneurs turned executives begin to contemplate their next chapter (stepping back, easing out, spending more time with the family, enjoying life, etc.), they often dwell on the things they wanted to do that never got done – their *pigtails*.

These pigtails sometimes become a reason (or excuse) to postpone their next chapter and stay around long enough to check a few more items off the list. Somehow, they believe that they now have whatever was lacking before (time, focus, energy, skill set, etc.) to get it done if they just hang around a little longer. So, the next step is postponed, and the pigtails keep hanging around.

This article explores strategic planning through a scenario that dives into management vs. leadership, addresses pigtails, and discusses a strategy to help leaders pivot to successfully achieve a mission and vision.

THE SCENARIO: MANAGEMENT SUCCESSION PLANNING

I watched a construction entrepreneur present during a meeting recently. The discussion was about management succession planning and the related organizational changes in leadership at a construction company. Seated around the conference table were company leaders and outside consultants.

This entrepreneur was passionately defending their position of being hesitant about change. They bounced from topic to topic, declaring all the things that needed to be done and how the potential successors needed to be aware of each of these items and their importance, all while simultaneously saying how the gathered successors may not have what it takes to get these imperatives completed their way.

Left unsaid was that these imperatives were in fact the pigtails that had been ignored for years while the entrepreneur was the chair, CEO, and president of the organization all at the same time.

Unreasonableness as an Asset (& a Liability)

While this phenomenon is not limited to entrepreneurs who become executives, it seems to happen with more frequency than with managers. Entrepreneurial spirit is, at its best, an untamable force. The journey is exciting, and each day is dynamic. Why would such unbounded spirit and drive ever need to be corralled or focused? Irish playwright George

Bernard Shaw stated it well: “Nothing was ever accomplished by a reasonable man. The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

While an entrepreneur’s success may depend on their unreasonableness, this trait often lends itself to hesitancy in turning over the reins of leadership and management to others, even when successors are well-suited – or maybe even better suited – for the tasks at hand. Add to that the high risk and fast pace of the construction industry, and you have a person who “leaps tall buildings in a single bound” – or at least that’s how they may perceive themselves.

A construction entrepreneur who evolves into a leader is an amazingly adaptive creature. The mentality must often evolve from *get it built* to *build others*, which can transform an organization. The question at hand is, “How can a construction financial professional (CFP) with a seat at the executive table facilitate this evolution?” Or it might be, “How can a CFP gain a seat at the executive table by facilitating this evolution?”

A Pivot

As a colleague and I debriefed the previously mentioned meeting during our drive from the contractor’s office, he shared a poignant observation.

When an outside executive came into the room, the construction entrepreneur’s demeanor shifted. This shift was dramatic, yet so natural, and it told of a possibility.

The construction entrepreneur pivoted instantly from tactical to strategic, setting about communicating their vision for the company’s future and all the possibilities and opportunities that awaited each leader in the room. The entrepreneur became animated as they delivered the message, and, in turn, the other leaders leaned in and engaged in the conversation.

Except for their mere presence, the outside executive brought nothing into the room to spark this shift. However, the entrepreneur had a *perceived expectation that the outsider had a perception of the entrepreneur’s leadership ability*. And through that perceived expectation, the entrepreneur’s behavior changed, even if temporarily, into a leader and a visionary.

The entrepreneur had a new set of eyes and ears in the room – a new audience. And they performed as if on cue, energized the conversation, presented opportunities, and painted the vision. They were, in fact and action, a leader.

WHAT IF THERE WAS A BETTER WAY?

So, what if an organization was structured to intentionally pivot that entrepreneur into leadership mode? Could that allow the vision, energy, and those great ideas to blossom earlier and more often? What if much of the busyness, overscheduling, and day-to-day management was no longer a priority? What if the first step to the next chapter was a step toward being a leader rather than a manager?

The entrepreneur must want to pivot. And to do so, they need to gain the perspective of the outside executive walking into the room and expect themselves

to be a leader. How do we create that desire to pivot?

Help Them See the Vision

As a CFP, you may work in an organization that is entrepreneurially created and managed. Such organizations can be fun, creative, and exciting places to work, and many flourish generationally.

Most organizations follow a predictable developmental cycle, naturally moving from the entrepreneurial stage to the professionally managed stage. In the early stages of a business entity’s existence, the entrepreneur’s passion and energy are often its only lifeblood.

As success and growth occur, most companies hire (or grow) professionals for managerial roles. As those professionals gain experience, tenure, and the entrepreneur’s trust, they move into more executive roles. This tends to move the organization from a totally entrepreneurially driven model to a more professionally managed model.

As the organization continues to grow and experience success, more seasoned professionals are often brought in, some with experience in larger organizations, and the move toward a professionally managed entity continues. Ultimately with growth, the entrepreneur allows some of these professionals to craft vision, values, mission, and strategy, and a professionally managed entity has been achieved.

Preferably, this development happens quietly over time, but sometimes it happens loudly and with much resistance and turmoil. Unfortunately, it also can be forced to occur after tragic business or personal events. And sometimes it takes an epiphany, which a trusted CFP can be integral in creating.

This epiphany begins with a vision and asking:

- Where does leadership see the company in the future?
- What does success look like in one, three, five, and 10 years?
- Who is going to drive that success?

- What does the organizational structure look like, in successive steps, to get from here to there?
- What if there were no limits?

These conversations, which tend to get far outside of the simple organizational chart, can create a canvas for the entrepreneur to observe what they have built with critical eyes – their own as well as those of the leadership team around them. More importantly, these conversations and exercises allow the entrepreneur to dream and make lasting impacts on the future organization.

The Right People in the Right Seats

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins talks of getting the right people on the bus. He goes into further detail by stating the importance of getting the *right people* in the *right seats* on the bus.

This created epiphany can be thought of as the bus station – it’s time to look around and decide where the bus should be going. Get the passengers and the drivers on the bus and in the most effective seats for the ride.

Charting a Vision

Gathering an entrepreneurially led organization to discuss the vision, values, mission, and strategies can be daunting. It can seem like an out-of-place combination of characters and actions.

So where do you begin with intention and buy-in? Contractors are often visual, and entrepreneurs are seldom spreadsheet driven – they prefer to filter and feel information differently than CFPs and rely on visuals.

Use an organizational chart as a dynamic visioning tool rather than a static and limiting way to move the conversation toward visioning. Laying out the visual structure of the bus can and should challenge organizational responsibilities and accountabilities. Today’s contracting environment is different than yesterday’s, and tomorrow’s will be different from today’s. Constantly challenging the status quo is the spirit of today’s forward-thinking organizations.

Begin with an overview discussion around the organizational chart:

- Have the business units changed?
- Have the geographic boundaries become obsolete?
- Has the recent war on talent and cyber threats changed how an organization prioritizes HR and technology?
- Was risk management, career pathing, and work-life integration part of the vernacular when the chart was drafted?
- With changes in the market and work-force, what changes are needed in an organization’s structure?

Be brutally honest:

- Is it up to date?
- Is it truly representative of how day-to-day responsibilities and accountabilities operate?
- Does it have a “next-up” format (i.e., if someone leaves the organization, is the next person already identified to step into the vacated role?)?
- Does it work toward the most honest reflection of the way things actually are, such as:

- Structure
- Reporting lines
- Accountability measures (use of key performance metrics)
- Next-up individuals and positions

Then, fast-forward to the future – at least 5-10 years.

The Vision: Dream Big

- What might the ideal organization look like in one, three, five, and 10 years?
- What are the dreams and goals of current executives, leaders, and managers?
- Are the right people on the bus and in the right seats? If not, how do we find the right people or move people to the right seats?
- Are all the needs and wants of tomorrow’s marketplace considered?

By pivoting their strategies, delegating tasks, and empowering their successors, LEADERS CAN CREATE A SMOOTH AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION that allows their organization to thrive for years to come.

- What positions/divisions need to be created?
- What positions/divisions will be obsolete?
- How can we stay agile in a challenging market?

THE IN-BETWEEN STEPS: WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

Change is not instantaneous; there is no magic wand that turns an entrepreneurial organization into a professionally managed one, nor is there a wand to fix or even improve a stagnant or developing organization.

The thought or vision of going from a brutally honest organizational structure to a “dream big” organizational chart involves intermediate steps. It is incremental, evolutionary, requires dialogue and collaboration, and takes trust and honesty – and it needs the entrepreneur’s vision.

A DEFT PIVOT (STRATEGIC PLANNING)

Helping the entrepreneur to see the organization as it could be (vision: the where) and then beginning the necessary conversations of traditional strategic planning are key.

Once the vision is painted in descriptive detail, the other pieces (mission: the what; values: the why; and strategies: the how) of the plan seem less like an unnecessary exercise and more like a path to an end – a path that begins with the next step.

And all the while, allow the pigtailed to be addressed and discussed in the context of a strategy to achieve a mission and vision. Pigtailed can represent more than just an unfinished task; they can also symbolize a leader’s reluctance to let go and embrace change. To successfully navigate succession planning and achieve their vision, leaders must recognize and address these pigtailed head-on.

By pivoting their strategies, delegating tasks, and empowering their successors, leaders can create a smooth and successful transition that allows their organization to thrive for years to come.

At the end of the day, we all still have pigtailed. But it’s never too late to let go and start fresh on a new path toward growth and success. **BP**



MIKE TRAMMELL, CPA, CCIIFP, is

Partner and Industry Advisory Leader of the Construction & Real

Estate practice at FORVIS (*forvis.com*) in Greenville, SC.

He has more than 38 years of experience in construction as a trusted advisor to contractors of all types and sizes.

He provides advisory, assurance, and tax strategy services to contractors and assists companies with operational, strategic, risk management, succession issues, financial and management systems and reporting, and tax planning.

He also works with construction-related groups concerning the industry’s long-term health and its member firms. Mike is a member of CFMA’s South Carolina Chapter and frequent speaker for CFMA and other construction associations on organizational leadership and industry-specific issues. He can be reached at 864-706-0580 and mike.trammell@forvis.com.