



PRACTICAL DREAMERS

In an interview with Health Progress, consultant and author Wess Roberts, PhD, shared his views on the qualities that can help executives achieve their goals for themselves and their organizations. Roberts draws on his experience as vice president of human resources at Fireman's Fund Insurance Companies and American Express and as a major with the U.S. Army Combat Arms Training Board. He holds master's and doctorate degrees in psychology from Utah State University and is the author of Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun.

"Practical dreamers." Wess Roberts uses this seeming oxymoron to describe successful healthcare executives. The practical dreamer is someone who has the ability to visualize how the organization can be in the future—"how it can be a better place for patients, the community, the people who work there," says Roberts. The vision is rooted in practical realities: Successful leaders stay in contact with the professional staff and with the community so the organization does not become obsolete.

Practical dreamers keep the organization focused on doing what is important in order to become the type of organization it wants to be, according to Roberts. He advises healthcare executives to choose carefully what services to provide and to be sure possible ventures fit the organizational plan.

In addition, leaders should attend to even small details that affect the quality of the institution's services. Employee courtesy, parking convenience, food quality, and escorts to accompany employees to their cars at night reflect the organization's goals and focus.

*Successful
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zations of
The Future*

CREATING THE CULTURE

Certain conditions must be present for an organization to be productive and innovative, and it is leaders' responsibility to create them.

"Reciprocal Self-Interest" "Reciprocal self-interest"—in Roberts's view, the most important concept for senior executives to understand—is an attitude that respects employees' needs, not just the organization's. In high-quality organizations, Roberts says, the relationship between the company and its staff is fair. Employees feel they are treated with trust and respect and that they "take away something for giving something."

How do managers create this climate of reciprocal self-interest? By responding to feedback and by modeling trusting and respectful behavior as they go about their own jobs. "If leaders behave in that manner, people will respond in kind," Roberts says.

Trust A climate of trust is essential to eliminate "senseless internal competition" fueled by backstabbing and subterfuge, Roberts adds. Leaders can enhance this climate by walking around and talking to people and by holding managers accountable for treating their subordinates fairly.

CEOs should clearly lay out their expectations about how managers should treat the people they work with. Senior executives are responsible for ensuring that managers are trained and developed, especially when they are initially promoted to management. By supporting managers, leaders can change the work atmosphere in a positive way.

Roberts notes that layoffs have eroded trust, and healthcare executives must rebuild it by nurturing a climate that says, "We're all on the same team. We are interdependent even if we are in different departments. We must solve problems together and not get into who's right and who's wrong."



PLAYING LEADERSHIP ROLES

Thinking of their jobs in terms of roles, and concentrating on improving their performance in each, will help leaders keep their organizations on track, Roberts says.

Casting Agent In this role, the CEO's responsibility is to be sure interviewing and hiring are done right throughout the organization so it has people who can carry out the leader's vision. Roberts advises taking time to hire people who can succeed in the job, rather than yielding to the pressure to fill a gap quickly. When two people are equally qualified on paper, then managers need to choose the one who fits best in the organization.

Trainer/Teacher The executive's role is to make sure that employees receive the formal or informal training they need, including ongoing education in new procedures and technologies. "Don't cut the training budget when you cut staff," Roberts advises, "because you're now asking employees to do more things."

Coach By capitalizing on individual strengths and correcting weaknesses, a coach gets a group of players to work together as a team.

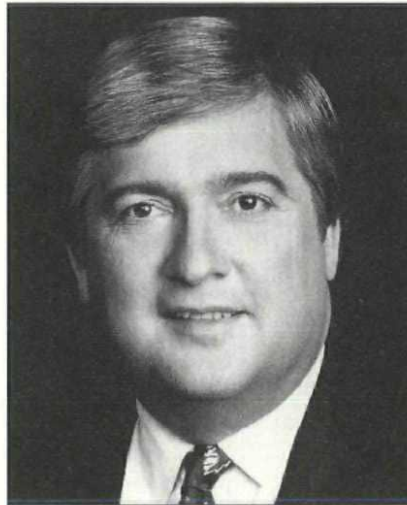
Inspector "Organizations get done what's inspected," according to Roberts. "If it's not inspected, it won't get done, at least not well." As an inspector, the senior executive's goal should not be to find mistakes. Instead, techniques that enable leaders to ask questions and learn what is going on (e.g., requiring reports that indicate how problems are being solved) help employees improve.

Referee Tensions *will* arise among people, and the leader's role is not to take sides but to minimize destructive disputes by confronting the participants. Roberts believes that in our society, staff members will always compete—for pay or promotions or, if these are not available, for the recognition of their boss.

"You need to make sure you spread your attention around and minimize the opportunity for people to label others as your pets," Roberts warns. "You have to make sure people can compete in constructive ways—for example, by doing a superior job. Find ways they can compete against standards, and make sure everybody has an equal opportunity to win."

Counselor Employees need to feel they can go to their boss for guidance and a second opinion; thus leaders need to know when to talk and when to be good listeners.

Engineer CEOs and other managers are responsi-



Rick Tang

"You need to make sure people can compete in effective ways," Roberts says.

ble for establishing mechanisms and structures so that work is organized efficiently and people know where their tasks fit in the work flow. In cross-training across departmental lines, it is important to proceed slowly and allow people time to learn new tasks. Managers must give people the freedom to act in the jobs they know well while ensuring there is an authority structure that identifies who they report to.

Delegator Delegating work can free executives so they can function more effectively and take advantage of others' expertise.

Roberts cautions against delegating responsibility without the necessary authority. "You have to trust others to do what you don't know how to do."

Resource Manager Leaders must make sure employees have the time, people, and equipment they need to get the job done. The most difficult aspect of this role is striking a balance so that, for example, understaffing or overstaffing does not occur.

Role Model Personal discipline is key in this role. By arriving on time for work, being prepared for meetings, dressing appropriately, and treating people courteously, leaders can demonstrate the behavior they prefer.

DISPELLING STRESS

For overworked executives who are balancing many roles, personal stress can thwart effectiveness. To control stress, Roberts finds two things most effective: eating well and exercising every day—even if only for half an hour—to get rid of tension and frustration. He also follows three "don'ts": Don't take everything seriously, don't take complaints or criticisms personally, and don't give everything number-one priority and try to be perfect.

Roberts surrounds himself with positive people. He advises deciding what issues or conflicts are important and not paying attention to the ones that are inconsequential in the long run. "Save your energy for when it counts," he says. "You're working in a life-and-death environment. People die; people get better; people have babies. It's a necessary job. Enjoy it."

—Judy Cassidy