

Beware 'credenzaware'

Too many misguided, ignored, and abandoned initiatives diminish a leader's credibility.

By Patrick R. Dailey and Charles H. Bishop Jr.

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Credenzaware is the term we somewhat humorously use to describe the unrealized output of well-intended organizational studies and project initiatives that all too often find their way to the shelves, disk drives, and credenzas of senior executives. (This term originally came to our attention when it was used by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan in their book *Execution*, in which they discuss the need for candid, robust dialogue in the planning processes.)

Credenzaware often has auspicious beginnings; emerging from competitive pressure and best in class intentions, hammered out from long and diligent hours of staff effort, offering provocative recommendations whose subsequent implementation is derailed, discounted, and dumped by the absence of accountability and unclear cause-effect linkage with business outcomes. Credenzaware is *nice* work that goes nowhere.

Where does credenzaware breed?

- *Problem Statement Drift:* Credenzaware breeds when a problem is not framed tightly and clearly; when the initial problem statement begins to *bob and weave*. Project work *may* be commissioned but progress too often feels more like solutions in search of problems. The resulting outcome often fails to address a matter that the collective leadership team deemed vital in the first place. Results may indeed be interesting but will fail to stimulate a collective commitment to action.

- *Conspiracy of Politeness:* This cancerous form of politeness exists where senior meetings occur without tough questions asked; challenges are rare; discussions feel choreographed; and the

“Q&A” phase appears managed. Trust, candor and full disclosure are not operating. Discussions just never penetrate the façade. There may be an unwritten rule that has emerged of “let’s all be polite and civil here.”

- *Loose Accountability:* While project design and implementation responsibilities are often delegated to staff groups,



Patrick R. Dailey, Ph.D. (left), and Charles H. Bishop Jr., Ph.D., founded Chicago Change Partners, a human resources consulting firm specializing in supporting senior leaders and their teams navigate personal and organizational change (www.chicagochange.com).

accountability for outcomes and strategic change management rests with senior leadership. When decision-making meetings conclude without assignment of senior management accountability for action *and* outcomes, the initiative is on the road to credenzaware-land. Accountable leader(s) should not necessarily feel threatened, yet should feel on the “hot seat” for managed action.

- *Shaky Project Leadership:* Properly commissioned projects and initiatives can inadvertently find themselves on the road to credenzaware-land when the selection of project leadership is driven by

“who is available” vs. “who is essential.” The wrong leadership selection immediately sends damaging signals about priority, collaboration, and resources across the organization. Bungled project leadership appointments — inept technical skills, project management and/or facilitation skills — derails and overburdens a well-targeted project due to rework, deterioration of cross-functional collaboration, and clumsy communication.

- *Absence of the “Wow Factor”:* Senior leaders repeatedly get caught up in the dilemma of every initiative being deemed an “A” priority. Project leaders lobby and compete for the active personal and political support by boards and senior leadership in their project. There are just so many projects and initiatives that the senior team can sponsor and monitor. There is an implicit line below which there is no *real* time, no excitement, no personal payoff — the juice is just not worth the squeeze. These “no wow” initiatives often fail to get fully airborne as they meander along, searching for senior sponsorship, and consuming political capital and material resources. As these failed initiatives ultimately subside and die, their residue surely does land on the senior leader’s credenza.

Credenzaware saps vitality and diminishes confidence. Every organization strives to create, evolve, and hold on to its distinctive performance culture — its secret sauce. However, the buildup of credenzaware on an executive’s shelf is a clear indicator that the organization is losing its edge — its competitive agility. Too many misguided and abandoned projects bankrupt a leader’s credibility in setting the organization’s course and skillfully navigating it through change to a more competitive position.

Where credenzaware builds up, your board will find an organization that is confused, abused, and “bummed out.” ■

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