

Beware 'credenzaware'

By Patrick R. Dailey

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redenzaware is the term we somewhat humorously use to d e s c r i b e t h e u n
re a l i z e d output of well-intended or- ganizational studies and project initia-
tives that all too often find their way to the shelves, disk drives, and credenzas of
senior executives. (This term origi- nally 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, robu- st dia- logue 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 account- ability and unclear
cause-effect linkage with business outcomes. Credenzaware is nice work that
goes nowhere. Where does credenzaware breed? • Problem Statement Drift:
Creden- zaware breeds when a problem is not framed tightly and clearly ; when
the initial problem statement begins to bob and weave. Project work may be com-
missioned but progress too often feels more like solutions in search of prob- lems.
The resulting outcome often fails to address a matter that the collective
leadership team deemed vital in the first place. Results may indeed be interest-
ing but will fail to stimulate a collective commitment to action. • Conspiracy of
Politeness: This can- cerous 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 oper- ating. Discussions just never penetrate the façade. There
may be an unwritten rule that has emerged of “let’s all be po- lite and civil here.”
• Loose Accountability: While project design and implementation responsibil- ities
are often delegated to staff groups, accountability for outcomes and strate- gic
change management rests with se- nior 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. Ac- 16
directors & boards c ompetitive eDge Beware ‘credenzaware’ Too many
misguided, ignored, and abandoned initiatives diminish a leader’s credibility. By
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Director S r oSter fourth quarter 2008 17 countable leader(s) should not necessar-
ily 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 se-

lection 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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