



THE INVERTED PYRAMID

The Inverted Pyramid is not about personal characteristics. It is how you think about how a company operates. It is a profound business model that places you at the base of your organization and puts the onus on you to push your message up through the levels that report to you.

01 UNDERSTAND GRAVITY

Do not assume that your message will spread

Traditional models suggest that gravity is an ally to leaders and information will naturally pass down the organization. In the Inverted Pyramid, you and your leadership team are at the bottom and your job is to radiate energy throughout the organization. Your job is to work against gravity.

Find the people around you who will carry your message out to the rest of the company. That is what they are there to do. They are not the ambassadors of the organization to you; they are your ambassadors to the rest of the organization.

*“Nothing cascades down an organization.
Gravity is not your friend.”*

- Frank Blake

Hold people accountable

For the Inverted Pyramid to work, you need your whole organization to recognize that they are accountable. Put in place and communicate clear consequences for the expectations not being met. It may require moving associates to a different position or out of the company entirely. The organization knows who is good on your team and who is not and will observe your actions carefully.

PERSONAL EXERCISE

At random occasions, ask associates at all levels of the organization, “What does the CEO want from you?”

1. How consistent are the responses?
2. Does it vary by department or business unit?
3. What action is required to increase the consistency of responses?

“Inverted pyramids are not friendly to the extent you view accountability as unfriendly.

Accountability is essential to running an inverted pyramid.”

- Frank Blake

Spread accountability. Try not to run everything through your few ‘go-to’ people. You risk overworking them and creating a damaging void in execution should they leave the company.

02 COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Help people internalize the message

How you communicate, how you drive your change in strategy, and what you want from your organization works best and most effectively when those above you internalize it for themselves. They need to take it as their message.

When you think about what you are going to drive in the organization, it needs to be simple, portable, and have a sense that you want the rest of the organization and each of its associates to succeed. Show people that you are invested in their success.

Be clear and visible

Do not assume that teams understand what you want. Make your message visible and clear.

CASE STUDY

Personalize attention.

Home Depot had a process where every week, every store would send in great examples of customer service.

Frank received 30 of the best examples from each region and wrote a personalized handwritten note to each associate involved – 250 handwritten notes per week.

“Dear Joe or Jane,

I heard you did [blank, blank, blank, blank].

You're wonderful.

I love you,

Frank.”

Insist on only one message being communicated through the organization. Be aware of whether each level of the company is adding components to your message and blurring its clarity. Most people are comfortable if the message is confusing as they get to hide behind its complexity.

Your team is part of your force field going up through the organization. Identify people on your team who you know are not a good projection of you and spend disproportionate time to turn them into positive broadcast towers.

“I wanted to be able to go into any Home Depot and ask any hourly associate, ‘What does the CEO want of you?’ and get the same answer. That was my objective for 8 years.”

- Frank Blake

Celebrate what you aspire to

You get what you celebrate. Who are the people that you literally or figuratively pull up onto the stage? The story you tell about them is what others will be inspired to do or become. If you do it inconsistently, randomly, or not at all, other people will fill the vacuum with whatever is on the organization's mind.

Think about how you make recognition personal to yourself. How do you make it exciting for your organization? How does it relate to the consistent behavior and business result that you want to drive?

Your approval is the most powerful leverage you have as a leader. Honor people with your attention.

PERSONAL EXERCISE

Define the organization's greatest challenge. Identify the people who took the time to put together a team, pioneered solutions or did something unusual to execute solutions to that challenge.

Celebrate them in a way that is recognizably unique to you. Give them a piece of yourself. That may be writing a letter of appreciation visible to everyone, a published video on the internal platform, or simply a dedication during a team call.

Make it personal.

"Everyone's just wondering, 'What do you actually want me to do?' Recognize them and say, 'That. You want to know what I want you to do, that's it.'"

- Frank Blake

Promote clearly

Never promote anyone without explaining why. Promotion is a great opportunity to tell the people who work for you what it is you expect. Help people understand what it is that the organization sees in the promoted associate. Tie the promotion to three things that you want to have.

03 LISTEN TO STEER CULTURE

Seek detail

When you recast towards an Inverted Pyramid that puts you at the bottom, the customer becomes the most important level above you followed by the frontline associates. In that structure, you have an enormous task to listen and understand what is happening above you.

Most of the organization prefers to keep you in a bubble as a natural impulse to resist large changes. Too many leaders are comfortable letting that happen. Show interest in employees so that they are interested in letting you know what is going on.

Pay attention to the small details – people may try to deter you by assuming that you are not interested in the micromanagement of the company. Get involved.

“Everyone who's worked in any organization larger than 25 people knows that there's only one answer to the boss, and the answer is, ‘Everything's great, you're wonderful, please leave, let me go about what I want to do in the way I want to do it.’”

- Frank Blake

Avoid asking yes or no questions as people automatically resort to positive responses. Ask how things are on a scale of 1 to 10. The justification for the respondent's rating leads to a more valuable conversation.

If you are asking about a project, assume that it is going badly. Framing the question around, "Why is project X not going well?" evokes a detailed description of what is going on. Rarely will someone push back and challenge your assumption.

“Listening is a contact sport.”

- Frank Blake

Choose what to change

Leading from an Inverted Pyramid will likely require a change in company culture. Culture is entirely malleable. Of all the elements of culture that may need to change, pick only three to focus on. Reference the past to honor the company's legacy but be clear about the reasons for why change is needed.

“If you are not changing the culture, be worried.”

- Frank Blake

Narrow priorities

There are four or five things that you can drive effectively. Your success or failure depends on picking the right four or five things.

Create a culture that enjoys fixing problems without you needing to be the person fixing them. Have your teams understand what their part of the four or five priorities are and let them focus on that.

04 LET CRISIS FUEL THE INVERTED PYRAMID

Motivate crisis as opportunity

The Inverted Pyramid thrives during a crisis. Your role as a leader is to communicate crisis as a privilege. It is an honor to row the boat in on an outgoing tide and you need to find the people who are excited to pull the oar.

Reach through the screen. Be a great communicator. Think of crisis as a moment to unify teams and redefine culture. It is the moment when your 'why' resonates and an opportunity to inspire a culture of continuous improvement.

If your teams are really engaged with you, it is because they believe that at a minimum, you are trying your best to find ways to help them succeed.

“Every leader needs his or her version of the Henry V speech. The wounds you get now are the scars you're going to proudly show off 5 to 10 years from now.”

- Frank Blake

*“This day is called the feast of Crispian:
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say ‘To-morrow is Saint Crispian.’
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
And say ‘These wounds I had on Crispin's day.’
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day.”*

William Shakespeare, King Henry V

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