

LEADING A TEAM

LONG-TERM FOCUS AND A DEEP BENCH

Want real power as a leader? Build and sustain a culture of teamwork and understand how to communicate a sense of purpose company-wide.

“One of the most important missions of a leader is to harness the energy of a team to create an exponential impact,” says John Schlifske, chairman and CEO of Northwestern Mutual, one of the nation’s leading financial services companies.

Leader as Communicator

Communication from the top is essential to building a sense of teamwork and common purpose. “Once I became CEO, I was humbled by the impact that my communications had on both the leadership team and company as a whole. As a result, I have a profound appreciation for the importance of communication from the top executive,” Schlifske says. “Our company is all about sustaining greatness over a long period of time, so it’s important to have leaders who consistently communicate that goal.”

Executive-level communication is about listening, too. “We’ve worked at creating more opportunities for employees to talk to us about what’s on their minds,” Schlifske notes. “That gives us a sense of what’s important to our employees and our clients.”

Frequent and consistent communication can reassure the team and its clients. “When people have external issues on their minds—like market meltdowns—you need a leader who will stand up and



John Schlifske, Chairman and CEO of The Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company

say, ‘We know what’s going on in the outside world. We have to react to it and we have to pay attention to it. But it doesn’t change our core focus.’”

What Every Team Needs

First, says Schlifske, every organization requires diversity of experience, intellect and background. “We need subject matter experts who understand what’s going on—people who can go really deep on a variety of different issues. We need that breadth of expertise and diversity to fill the intellectual gaps that might come from any one person’s shortcomings on a subject.

“The second thing to look for is go-to people,” says Schlifske. “These are the

people you can trust to get things done. You know they’ll be honest and straightforward with you. You can rely on them to execute against a goal in a way that is consistent with the values and culture of the organization.”

A strong bench is the third essential ingredient for a successful team, he says. “You have to have people committed to the team over the long run. They should be able to attract talented employees who can get the job done. Succession planning is ongoing. When you bring new people into the business, you must create experiences that will help them credibly move throughout the organization.”

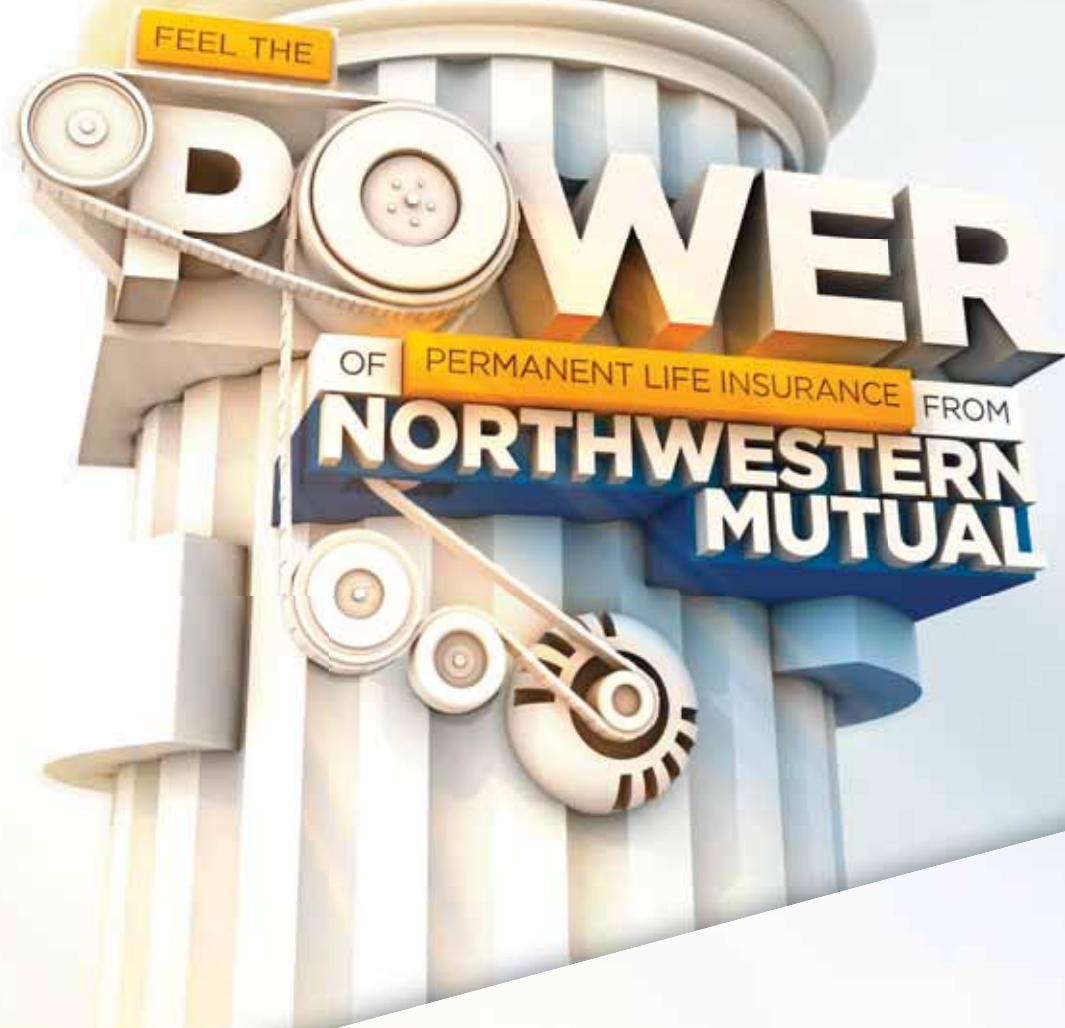
Eyes on the Horizon

“When leaders focus only on financial success they may start to cut corners, and that can lead to deteriorating employee engagement,” says Schlifske. “For example, we recently made a decision to build on-site health centers. There is, of course, a short-term cost, but we believe there will also be a positive long-term impact—in both employee engagement and health.”

Schlifske says good leaders should keep their eyes on the long-term horizon, and help their teams see that horizon too. “I’m as much worried about being a strong company 154 years from now as I am about hitting a particular milestone next quarter or next year.”

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