

LEADERSHIP: THREE KEY QUESTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with the stipulation that this article is neither meant to be exhaustive nor all-inclusive with regard to the topic of leadership. There are more books written upon the subject of leadership than perhaps any other single topic in the annals of mankind.¹ Nevertheless, what follows are a few ideas that are salient and relevant to this very important topic.

Leadership may be defined as “[t]he position or function of being a leader, a person who guides or directs a group,” the “ability to lead,” and “an act or instance of leading.”² I have heard it said that if you think you’re leading and no one is following you might just be out on a walk.³ For centuries the question has been asked if people are born leaders or if they can be taught or trained to become one. The Gallup Leadership Institute would have us believe that you either have the DNA to be a leader or you don’t; however, other organizations believe that with the right training, tools, and perspective anyone can become a leader.⁴ Like sports, or any other

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1. A key word search for “leadership” using the WorldCat platform, self described as “the world’s largest network of library content and services,” returns over 957,000 results. WORLDCAT, https://www.worldcat.org/search?qt=worldcat_org_all&q=leadership (last visited Apr. 18, 2016).

2. *Leadership Definition*, DICTIONARY.COM, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/leadership?s=t> (last visited Apr. 18, 2016).

3. This quote is attributed to Benjamin Hooks, former director of the NAACP. E.g., Nicole Fallon Taylor, *Thirty-five Inspiring Leadership Quotes*, BUS. NEWS DAILY (Apr. 4, 2016, 7:20 AM), <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/7481-leadership-quotes.html>.

4. See Jan-Emmanuel De Neve et al., *Born to Lead? A Twin Design and Genetic Association Study of Leadership Role Occupancy*, 24 LEADERSHIP Q. 45, 45 (2013) (“suggest[ing] that what determines whether an individual occupies a leadership position is the complex product of genetic and environmental influences . . .”). See also Kari Keating, David Rosch & Lisa Burgoon, *Developmental Readiness for Leadership: The Different Effects of Leadership Courses on Creating*

field of endeavor for that matter, some people have more natural ability than others; and yet, as has been proven again and again in athletic competition, natural ability alone does not always translate into results on the scoreboard. Most assuredly the same can be said about the courtroom, the firm, the boardroom, and even the marketplace. There is a lot more to being a leader than birthright.

The key inquiry then is, what can we do if we want or need to become effective leaders—leaders whom others willingly follow, and, just as importantly, leaders who get results.

Prior to addressing these questions, however, there is an important foundational aspect of leadership to consider, and that is position authority versus moral authority. Position authority is the authority and responsibility derived from holding a particular position or role.⁵ Moral authority grows out of who you are and how you work with others:⁶ Are you honorable, do you lead by example, do you build consensus, are you a team player? Do you live by the same rules as everyone else or do you believe your elevated role and status gives you license to live by different rules? We have all seen individuals who strive to get results by continually leaning on their position authority. In my experience, the more someone relies on their position authority to induce people to perform or adhere, the weaker that authority becomes. On the other hand, those leaders who rely more consistently on their moral authority find that authority grows over time and increases their ability to positively impact and lead those around them. The first only shrinks with use while the latter grows with use. A word to the wise would be to focus on using moral authority, who you are and how you lead to get results, rather than the title before or after your name.

Now on to the main theme of this article—what it takes to be an effective leader. I propose that we look at leadership through three very different and yet highly related lenses. Think of them as three legs of a stool:

“Ready, Willing, and Able” Leaders, J. OF LEADERSHIP EDUC., Summer 2014, at 1; Michael D. Mumford et al., *Development of Leadership Skills: Experience and Timing*, 11 LEADERSHIP Q. 110 (2000).

5. This type of authority “comes not only from benefits and sanctions, such as promotions, bonuses, dismissals, or discipline, but also from the credibility that is associated with a particular status.” DEBORAH L. RHODE, *LAWYERS AS LEADERS* 50 (2013).

6. See Jim Sniechowski, *Why is Moral Authority Critical for a Leader?* LINKEDIN (Apr. 9, 2015), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-moral-authority-critical-leader-jim-sniechowski-phd>.

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Each is necessary, but none alone is sufficient. Consider that organizations of all types typically hire leaders because they need the leaders' help to achieve results. The most important questions in the hiring process tend to be some version of "can you help us get results?" or "do you have a track record of achieving the kinds of results we need?" There are many examples of individuals who are fired for failure to achieve the results their organization requires, and often they should be. There is no doubt that getting results is essential for any organization and yet, organizations can and should expect more. Consider further how frequently organizations ultimately terminate leaders because of failures in the first or second legs of the stool, sometimes in spite of their successful results. We absolutely should be held to the standard of accomplishment of organizational goals if we are to maintain a position as a leader. What I would like us to consider is the fact that there are two other essential aspects of leadership we must also focus on improving.

With that in mind let us discuss each of these three areas of leadership.

I. WHO ARE YOU AS AN INDIVIDUAL?

*"What you are shouts so loudly I cannot hear what you say."*⁷

When it comes to being an effective leader, who you are will ring throughout history nearly as loudly as the results you achieve. There are numerous examples in both ancient and modern history of individuals whose excellent results were always tempered a bit by their personal character flaws. Here are a few key ideas or areas to focus on in with respect to this leg of the leadership stool:

Honesty. It has been said that honesty is the best policy and undoubtedly this is true. We have known since we were children that, if someone is dishonest in one area of their lives there is

7. This quote is attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, originally articulated as "[w]hat you *are* stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary." Garson O'Tool, *What You Do Speaks So Loudly that I Cannot Hear What You Say*, QUOTE INVESTIGATOR (Jan. 27, 2011), <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/01/27/what-you-do-speaks/> (quoting RALPH WALDO EMERSON, LETTERS AND SOCIAL AIMS 80 (1875)).

nothing to say they won't be dishonest in another area. The fact is there are too many hurdles to being a good and effective leader without displaying even a hint of dishonesty. Tell the truth, do not lie, and be honest.

Integrity. Integrity can be defined as “[a]dherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honest.”⁸ Good leaders act with integrity every day. People must be able to rely on you as an individual and as a leader to live accordingly to your principles. If you do not have any principles you adhere to, you better find some quickly.

Open to New Ideas. No one has all the answers. Will Rogers put it this way: “Everyone is ignorant, just on different subjects.”⁹ Yes a leader needs to have answers, but they also have to be open and willing to consider new ideas, new approaches, and new ways of doing things. People will not long follow a leader who is inflexible and unwilling to consider other ideas.

Fairness. We have all seen leaders play favorites and it creates problems on so many levels. It is human nature to have friends and to appreciate people who are like us but there is no room in leadership for favoritism or unfair treatment of anyone.

Innovation, Resourcefulness and Agility. Leaders are always needed to solve problems. The problems of the future will undoubtedly require leaders who are continually striving to find better and more effective methods to get the job done with positive results. As Psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy observed, the illiterate of the 21st century will not be people who cannot read and write; they will be those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.¹⁰

Passion, Positivity, Optimism, and Vision. This is not about becoming the proverbial Pollyanna who sees the world through rose-colored glasses. Rather, this is about being the leader who is excited about the future and their own personal preparation for it. Luck is what happens when opportunity meets preparation.¹¹ This type of

8. *Integrity Definition*, DICTIONARY.COM, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/integrity?s=t> (last visited Apr. 18, 2016).

9. JOSEPH H. CARTER, *THE QUOTABLE WILL ROGERS* 81 (2005).

10. ALVIN TOFFLER, *FUTURE SHOCK* 414 (1990) (“Tomorrow’s illiterate will not be the man who can’t read; he will be the man who has not learned how to learn.”).

11. This quote is attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca, originally articulated as “[t]he best wrestler . . . is not he who has learned thoroughly all the tricks and twists of the art . . . but he who has well and carefully trained himself in one or two of them, and watches keenly for an opportunity of practising them.” WIKIQUOTE, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Seneca_the_Younger (last visited Apr. 18, 2016) (quoting L. ANNAEUS SENECA, *ON BENEFITS*, VII, 196-97 (Aubrey Stewart, Trans., 1887)).

leader is continually striving to bring their best selves and skills to work every day and is focused on assisting their team members to do the same. As a result, they truly are prepared for every opportunity that presents itself.

Who you are as a leader could be summed up by this idea from General Arnold Schwarzkopf: “If you look at the leadership failures that have occurred in this country in the last 100 years, you’ll find that 99% of all those failures were failures in character. They were not failures in competence.”¹² To me this is the very essence of who you are as a leader.

II. HOW DO YOU LEAD?

“Before you are a leader success is all about growing yourself. . . . When you become a leader success is all about growing others.”¹³

This is the very essence of leadership—leading, developing, and growing people to be better than they believed possible. Here are a few ideas:

Empowering Leadership. In my first corporate management job nearly twenty-five years ago my boss told me I could bring him any problem as long as I brought at least two possible solutions to solve that problem. In a similar vein he also said “You can bring me any complaint as long as you bring at least two possible solutions.” An empowering leader is one who is continually striving to give his or her people the skills, experience, and authority to make many of their own decisions. Over time, as I considered the possible solutions I wanted to present to my boss, I realized in many instances I had everything I needed to move forward with a solution on my own.

Motivating Leadership. Some of the very best leaders are often a blend of coach and cheerleader. Among other things, a coach is a person who not only teaches skills to his or her team members but who is continually focused on helping them to improve those skills. This kind of coach knows he or she has to help his or her team members improve their natural abilities as well as overcome their inherent weaknesses. This type of leader is also continually looking for ways to develop, strengthen and uplift his or her team members.

The other side of this same coin is being a cheerleader for the team. In other words this leader is not only working to improve the

12. Matt Valley, *Gen. Schwarzkopf: Armed Forces Epitomize Leadership and Sacrifice*, NAT'L REAL EST. INVESTOR (Dec. 1, 2001), <http://nreionline.com/mag/gen-schwarzkopf-armed-forces-epitomize-leadership-and-sacrifice>.

13. JACK WELCH & SUZY WELCH, WINNING: THE ANSWERS: CONFRONTING 74 OF THE TOUGHEST QUESTIONS IN BUSINESS TODAY 49-50 (2006).

skills of the team members but is also actively recognizing their contributions and motivating them to bring their very best efforts to the gridiron of daily life. Too many leaders spend much of their time judging and criticizing instead of reminding their people of their potential and abilities. Dr. Stephen Covey put it this way: "Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves."¹⁴ If you are consistently giving your people feedback to fine tune their abilities as well as reminding them of their potential and ability to get the job done they cannot help but rise to the occasion.

As a leader I have found that my team members typically grow to the level of trust I have in them. If I am constantly micromanaging and overseeing every aspect of the job they will never take ownership of the job because they do not feel trusted to accomplish it.

Collaboration is in many ways acting like the conductor of a wonderful orchestra bringing out the very best from the strings, the brass, the woodwinds, the percussion and truly every section of the orchestra to create the vibrant melodies and deep and energizing movements that are so essential to every great work of music. Great leaders are always looking for ways to create collaboration on their team and with other teams as well.

This reminds me of an interview with Dr. Robert Jarvik several years ago. Dr. Jarvik was the inventor of the first successful artificial heart valve, which he successfully installed in numerous patients.¹⁵ One day a leading author interviewed him about his thoughts on leadership. During the interview, Dr. Jarvik was called out for an emergency while the author waited in his office. After a few moments another man entered Dr. Jarvik's office and began cleaning the room and emptying the trash. When the author asked about his role within the organization the gentleman described his job and contribution in this way: "The doctor and I save lives."

In my mind this story is the epitome of collaboration, empowerment and engagement. This man knew his work was an essential element of the work that must be accomplished to save the lives of their patients. His work did not require an MD to perform, but it did require his best efforts and energy each and every day. Another way to think about this is to consider what people receive when they are with you. Are they motivated and energized, and

14. *The Leader Formula: The Four Things that Make a Good Leader*, STEPHEN R. COVEY (Dec. 10, 2007, 11:37 AM), <http://www.stephencovey.com/blog/?p=6> (emphasis omitted) (describing what makes a great leader).

15. *See Jarvik Heart*, <http://www.jarvikheart.com/basic.asp?id=43>.

therefore more likely to be successful at accomplishing the goals of the firm?

III. DO YOU GET RESULTS?

When I think of getting results, two examples come to mind. The first is from a broad, or macro, view of the world. On one of my first days in business school in 1985 one of my professors presented the list of Fortune 100 companies from 1900. I recognized a few of the companies on the list as the professor stated that only seven of those Fortune 100 companies were still in business more than eight decades later. No wonder I did not recognize most of them. Why do you suppose ninety-three of those companies had gone out of business? It is very simple—they stopped producing the results required to stay in business. Specifically, they failed to produce goods and services that the buying public needed or wanted.

The truth is that no organization has a right to exist. At first blush this may sound a bit harsh and perhaps even unfair. In reality however, an organization is only as valuable as the goods and services that it offers and the results that it achieves. Similarly, leaders in any organization are only as good as the results that they achieve.

The second example of getting results is from a micro, or individual, view of the world. More than thirty years ago I was bragging to my boss about the wonderful sales results that I had achieved the prior month. My boss quickly responded: “*What have you done for me lately?*” What a wake-up call! He quickly reminded me that no one can live for long on a single win. As leaders, we must continually get better, help our people get better, and achieve the results that we and our firms need.

The question then becomes: What can leaders do to get better results more consistently? There are really two ways: 1) identify a great strategy or plan to get results and 2) execute that strategy with excellence, consistency, and precision.

This article does not devote any time to creating a powerful strategy or a plan to get results. There are innumerable books, articles, and consultants devoted to helping you create these. Of greater importance to this discussion is the issue of how you, as a leader, can ensure that people consistently execute the plan that you created with precision to get the results that you and your firm need. Initially, it would seem that this is a superfluous question in any organization. You are paying these people, aren't you? Why wouldn't they perform every goal and strategic initiative of the organization with precision? Any leader with more than a few weeks on the job will tell you that this is much easier said than done.

The stories are legion of people and teams that knew something was important for their success, or perhaps even essential to their own health and wellbeing, and yet somehow failed to successfully execute those very things. I have long known that the distance between knowing and doing is typically far greater than the distance between not knowing and knowing.

When it comes to execution there are four big ideas: 1) focus, 2) leverage, 3) engagement, and 4) accountability.¹⁶ Below is an overview of each idea:

1. **Focus:** The problem most leaders and team members face is that there are far too many goals to accomplish at the same time. For most of us, that is not likely to change any time soon. In this case, I recommend that you identify the one goal, project, or initiative that will help the organization move forward in the next six to eighteen months. This is the one goal that you know that will make all the difference or, if left undone, will cause serious consequences.

2. **Leverage:** You must look at the sub-goals and activities that will ensure that you successfully achieve your goal. These are the very things that give you leverage for success on the goal. Here is a very simple example. You run the bakery in a large grocery store and have been asked to increase your sales by 15% year after year. You have no control over marketing or advertising and perhaps not much latitude over the selections that you offer. So what things can you control that will help increase sales? You can focus on having clean displays, fresh donuts on the shelves by 6:00 a.m., fresh bread by 7:00 a.m., friendly and helpful staff, and so forth. You get the picture. In other words, your leverage on this goal is really focusing on the activities and behaviors that will drive your goal forward.

3. **Engagement:** The purpose of engagement is to create visibility on your team about how consistently well they are performing the activities and behaviors for your weekly goal. Scoreboards in any athletic endeavor both exhibit the key performance indicators of the athletes and engage the spectators. The key idea here is to develop highly visible scoreboards of the team's performance on these weekly activities and how they are moving the goal forward. For example, these scoreboards might include the tracking of billable hours or the activities required to generate new business with current clients or find new clients.

16. See CHRIS MCCHESENEY, SEAN COVERY & JIM HULING, *THE 4 DISCIPLINES OF EXECUTION: ACHIEVING YOUR WILDLY IMPORTANT GOALS* (2012). This book covers all of these ideas in detail, and I commend it to your reading.

These team scoreboards will create natural competition on the team, which motivates the team members to consistently perform the activities required to achieve these goals.

4. Accountability: As a leader you need to know how people are doing each week with their activities to move the goal forward. The recommendation here is to create a consistent forum, ideally a short weekly meeting, to allow every team member to present their proposed activities and behaviors that will move the goal forward, as well as report on their activities for the previous week.

These four steps are easy to say and incredibly powerful in their ability to improve your ability to realize the results that you and your firm need to achieve. However, after nearly a decade of working on these four steps with hundreds of clients, I have also found that they are rarely focused on or done consistently. Let me close this section with one final example.

Some time ago I was watching a college football game in which one team was leading by more than forty points in the fourth quarter. After a missed play by the leading team, one of their players exited the field and his head coach read him the riot act for not doing his part on that play. During this interchange, the announcer mentioned that this coach did not look at the scoreboard until the end of the game. He focused on every player executing every play with precision, ensuring that every player was doing his part. If that happened, then the outcome of the game was not really in question. The announcer then offered his opinion that this is what made this coach the best coach in college football.

In my mind that is another key to effective execution on any team. Stop maniacally focusing on the score or result that you want and start focusing on the behavior and activities of your people that get you the score.

So where do you start if you want to be a better leader, or you want to be prepared when it is finally your turn to be a leader? *I have heard it said to start anywhere and go everywhere.* Start where you feel the greatest pain or shortfall or start where you see the greatest opportunity for growth. Ask for advice from people you trust who have your best interest in mind.

In *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant wrote, “[W]e are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit”¹⁷ When it comes to becoming true leaders in our firms and in our lives, I suppose this says it all. Excellence is truly a lifelong endeavor. I hope these three areas will give you some tangible ideas to consider and specific areas to work on:

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17. WILL DURANT, *THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY* 98 (1933).