Nine Principles for
Growing Leadership Capability
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INTRODUCTION

In our work as executive coaches and consultants to management, we have had the pleasure of learning a lot about leadership from successful and not-so-successful leaders. While the full scope of the art and science of developing leadership potential is far larger than can be presented here, we believe that the following principles and ideas are useful for managers faced with getting the most from their people. It is a fundamental truth that **the better the leadership, the better the business outcomes.** Although this truth is often overlooked in our "get-results-now" business climate, the value in developing your people (and yourself) is well worth the extra effort it takes, as all business success hinges on the quality of leadership.

1. Discovering the Reality of Leadership

Our myths of leadership are deeply embedded. Since grade school, we have been told tales of political, military, civil rights, and athletic leadership. We have come to expect that someone who is identified as a "leader" will somehow look "heroic," or that they have no relevant flaws, or that they somehow are endowed with certain innate qualities that make them different. The real picture of leaders is much more mundane. We are all leaders: within our worksites, with our families, and with our communities. We all have the capacity to influence, to motivate, and to inspire. And we also have the capacity to de-motivate, to deny our obligations, and to work counter-productively due to bad habits, personal biases, or blind spots. Understanding that **leadership is a choice, not an attribute** is a fundamental starting point for organizational and lifetime success.

The Take-Away: *The promise of leadership hinges on holding realistic expectations, and working to see that ALL people have strengths of leadership that can be leveraged for success, and weaknesses that must be managed to avert problems. Only when we relinquish our myths and establish realistic expectations for leadership can we discover where we can grow in the most effective manner. Once we know our strengths and weaknesses, we can exercise choice on how to best handle any given situation.*

2. Leading by Example

"Leading by Example" is a common response when I ask Managers that I am coaching "What, exactly are key behaviors of Leadership?" One of those key behaviors, of course, is providing feedback, both <u>positive</u> in the form of recognition for good effort and results, and <u>negative</u> in the form of observations of poor performance, and/or suggestions to get better. Many Managers have a hard time with this. They may excel at "stroking" their people, but have a hard time giving critical, corrective feedback. Or alternately, they may excel at giving critical feedback, but be poor at providing positive strokes. The Leader can make it easier to give and receive feedback if they practice two principles: Appreciation, and Honesty. Both will probably require some discomfort, depending on the personality. Those leaders who are usually unsatisfied with progress and are critical of the lack of performance can lead by example by actively practicing appreciation of strengths and successes, and verbalize them when they are noticed. Better yet, they can actively work at finding things worth appreciating every day. Those leaders who are afraid to comment on poor performance can lead by example by having people evaluate their own leadership using a leadership survey. Such "request for candor" on the part of the leader, followed by an honest reporting back of the leader's strengths and weaknesses, makes it easier for the leader to give feedback to others because they have "role-modeled" how to receive and use "negative" feedback responsibly.

The Take-Away: A*ppreciating positive activity and honestly confronting poor- or off-purpose performance can best be achieved by starting with yourself. Demonstrating how to receive*

feedback and handle criticism is a great way to "lead by example" when you need to lead and manage others.

3. Aligning Talent
It is an obligation of leaders to do their best job aligning the available talent in the organization with the needed activity. Jim Collins research into great companies reveals that "getting the right people 'on the bus' and in the right seats" is a keystone for greatness. On the other side of the coin, mis-aligned talent is costly, in terms of <u>output</u> (because people rarely motivate themselves do things they are not passionate or good at), in terms of <u>team spirit</u> (because people who are in the wrong roles either end up "freeloading," or "disgruntled"), and in terms of <u>erosion of trust in leadership</u> (because subordinates and associates wonder why the heck the leader is not addressing something they see as a real problem!). The concept of "aligning talent" recognizes that not everyone will be good at everything. As such, aligning talent requires the leader to make the best and most honest appraisal of individual capability. Dr. John Grinnell's "Nine Capacities for Leadership" is an excellent framework for appraising talent. Once the situation is clear, the leader must then muster courage to make the bold moves necessary. The irony is that in the end, it is usually a relief to all that people get into the right roles that fit their capabilities.
The Take-Away: *Mis-aligned talent is costly, and the challenge of aligning talent can be uncomfortable. Yet real relief and performance improvement occur when talent is properly aligned with needed activities.*

4. Providing Certainty in Direction
People who just go and do their work everyday so they can get a paycheck may be reliable. They may be good performers. They may be rock-solid-citizens and nice, friendly people. But they are unlikely to be giving you their best, because the value-equation for them is simple: I put in my work, and I get my paycheck. This is called transactional employment. Transactional employees lack inspiration, yet they are not lost causes. Some may have come to expect transactional employment because their leaders have never elevated their work to anything other than a series of tasks. This is usually due to a blind spot on the leader's part. It is useful for the leader to understand that many people want more, at least in part because in an information-rich society with many choices, they want to know that the company that they work for has leadership that casts its eye to being successful in the future. Yet one thing is certain, most people have a real need to know where they are going, even if they are just passengers on the train. Those who are leaders, and those who are the top-performers, have an even greater need to know where they are going. All too much has been made of "vision" and "mission" statements, and much money and time has been wasted by management groups working to construct an "enticing" vision and mission for their company. Yet despite the excesses of these exercises, the underlying assumption is correct that people want to contribute to something greater than themselves, and they want to know where they are going.
The Bottom Line: *Real motivational benefits accrue when a leader can help his/her leaders communicate where the organization is heading in the most direct means possible. It is best if this communication is repeated numerous times, and supplemented with visuals to which people can readily refer. (Think of your need to communicate as if it were an "advertising campaign" that gets people to take action: to buy your idea of what you must do to succeed in your business.)*

5. Breaking Inertia
People are creatures of habit. Habits make our life easier, as we do not have to think about how to do something, we just (habitually) do it, like brushing our teeth. Some researchers have indicated that, with only minor adjustments, most adult activity is habitual. Since habit rules our world, an essential leadership skill is to know how to break the inertia of habits when those habits no longer serve our purposes. The first step is recognizing that most activity, even the common condition of "chaos" in the fast-paced world of mortgage refinancing, is still a habit. One key to breaking inertia and allowing people to move with purpose in newer, better ways is using Significant Events. Significant Events provide a real-life instance of a need or a goal that the business must respond to. Significant Events can be used as reference points, but the leader

must elevate the event from an abnormality to Significance by capturing the emotion necessary to respond to it effectively and directing it into responsible behavior. And it is important to heighten the emotion of anxiety in a significant event, as otherwise it is easy for people to see it as "busy-ness as usual." Leaders can do this by drawing attention to the event (if it is not obviously fear-inducing, as September 11th was for our country), and referring to it as a pivot-point for new responsiveness.

The Take-Away: *Since people are so habit-seeking, Significant Events are required to wake them up and point them in new directions. Leaders must be on the look-out for Significant Events (or be willing to manufacture them) in order to break the inertia of habit and form the "pivot-point" for the formation of new habits. Significant Events can form a reference point that establishes both the need for change, and the way to change.*

6. Establishing Teams and WorkGroups as Communities of Interest

Humans are social beings. We establish our routines through interaction with others. We gauge our actions, our decision-making, our morality, and our ethics on the basis of the people with whom we interact. We are often profoundly influenced by those with whom we surround ourselves, yet in business, leaders often forget the power of the group to improve the success ratio of each member. Focusing instead on one-on-one coaching and performance management, many leaders fail to reap the power of the group to influence behavior, and to establish patterns of success.

The Take-Away: *In order to get the most from good intentions to alter behavior and improve performance, leaders can capture the power of people's natural inclination to look to the group for support and reinforcement. While work activity itself may be fundamentally an independent affair, the leader can increase the chances of "right action" if he or she will pull people to together on a regular basis as a "learning community" to discuss best practices, lessons learned, and to keep accountabilities on the top-of-mind so that "peer pressure and team spirit" can inspire and reinforce effective behavior change and improved performance.*

7. Getting Change to Stick

Okay, so you've got the conditions for change in place: everyone has realistic expectations, you're leading by example, you've made tough decisions and aligned talent, you've provided certainty in direction, you've broken inertia with a significant event, and you have set up a team to keep the spirit of change alive and reinforce performance. What is the key to making change stick? Two words say it all: Accountability and Perseverance. Without the need to account for something, it is difficult to ensure that change happens. And without perseverance, or dogged determination, there can be no assurance that the change will be nothing more than a fanciful experiment in futility. Many times we have seen managers get interested in change without putting these two conditions in place, only to be disappointed that the best intentions of their plans to change associates (or their own) behavior did not come to fruition.

The Take-Away: *Once the conditions for change are established, there are two key pieces that almost complete the puzzle for performance improvement. Measurable accountabilities must be established and reviewed on a constant basis, and continuous effort must be applied, even when there is backsliding evident. Without measurable accountabilities, there is no real way to know if the change is occurring. Without perseverance---constancy of effort---regression to the old habits is almost assured.*

8. Maintaining Momentum

Human change can occur in an accelerated process if momentum is encouraged. The metaphor of a giant flywheel has often been used to illustrate intentional change. At first, it may take great effort to get the flywheel to move. By making sure that the wheel is actually moving (accountability), sharing the ordeal and encouraging effort (teamwork), and exerting constancy of purpose (follow-through), the pace of rotation increases and it becomes easier and easier to move the flywheel. At some point you reach a sustainable velocity, but if you don't want the flywheel to eventually slow to a stop, then you can't stop exerting effort. Such it is with human change. Reinforcing mechanisms must be put into place to maintain momentum.

The Take-Away: *In order to make sure that momentum is secured, consider using tools such as recognition ceremonies (not necessarily formal), performance check-ups, team retreats and rallies, and personal rewards to ensure that the needed performance improvements do not fall to the wayside.*

9. Going It Alone

Whether you are at the top of an organization (where it is often lonely), or merely want to improve your own performance to achieve at a higher level, there are some common pitfalls that will prevent you from being "all you can be." The first pitfall is a lack of perspective. We all have blindspots, and we they are by definition not something that we are aware of. Therefore, we require someone outside ourselves to help us see them. The second pitfall is lacking outside accountability. When we are accountable only to ourselves for making change, we are likely to be more tolerant of our slips back into our past habits, for we lack that outside "witness" that helps keep us true. Our integrity to our best intentions is more likely to fail us when we think that no one is looking. The third pitfall is failing to build a support network of some sort. Without others to support us and en-courage us as a team would, we are more likely to "fall-off-the-wagon", especially when the going gets tough. Everyone needs encouragement to perform at their best, and even the most hyper-motivated individual will do better when they know that people are pulling for them.

The Take-Away: *Just because you are going it alone doesn't mean that you are any less in need of the eight change principles listed above. An outside coach who will tell you the truth, keep you accountable, and encourage you when you need it is a valuable resource to turn to when you want to be your best.*

CONCLUSION

An old joke goes like this: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has got to want to change. While these nine principles represent core conditions that support real leadership performance improvement, they are not "100% Guaranteed." Individuals must want to change. Fortunately most people do want to improve. And most people, when they realize that all their behavior has a component of leadership in it, step up to their best ability to lead others, while being grateful for the opportunity to improve their leadership capability.