

Unlocking Potential: The Real Work of Growing Leadership Capability

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1. The False Expectations of “Heroic Leadership”

Heroic leaders are rare yet exalted icons of hope in our culture. We yearn for their presence in our lives, and perhaps strive to be one. We compare contemporary leaders to Washington, Eisenhower, Churchill, Gandhi, or Mother Teresa. Yet many times the flaws of those persons are overlooked in the storytelling about their “heroic leadership.” Or, the only aspect that is emphasized is when they were on top of their game, and so a “fair and balanced approach” to their career is missing. Perpetuating the myths of these rare few exceptional leaders causes us as a culture to hold out false hope that they are “out there somewhere,” or that we too can be one, or that we can have the good fortune to work for one.

By waiting for our mythic hero to appear, we miss the chance to do the hard work to develop ourselves or others. We gauge our own abilities against this myth of heroism, and either place a burden of unachievable perfection on ourselves and thereby quit, or compulsively strive to attain something that is not who we truly are.

As we perpetuate the myth of the heroic leader, we fail to understand that our own (current) leader is simply a human being doing the best they can. When they inevitably fail the test of mythic perfection to which we cling, we disappointedly cut them down and undermine their authority. The cynicism of the press for our elected Presidents is one example of this behavior. Imbued with the icon of the “bully pulpit,” we hold our President accountable for everything from the state of the economy to the state of the world. Yet it is the aggregate influence of tens of thousands of factors which really impact the state of things, not simply the words and policies of one administration.

Heroic leaders do occasionally appear in the world (rarely, like a hole-in-one), yet these individuals are almost the accidental confluence of some strong personality traits and extreme situations. Once we give up the illusion of the heroic leader, we can look more closely at how to develop leadership strength in ourselves and others, and maintain a more forgiving outlook when judging others.

2. Leading by Example: Humility and the Emerging Leader

People do what they see. They follow their leaders. When they see their own leaders give up their own myth of the hero, and actively work to get better, it gives them permission to get better too. If the manager has humility and an earnest desire to identify weaknesses and either shore them up or discover ways to manage around them so that they can contribute to the betterment of the concern, then he or she can establish themselves as an “emerging leader.” When compared to the “perfected” image of the mythical heroic leader, the emerging leader has much to do, much to improve. Yet an interesting paradox has been born out by research conducted by Jim Collins: The most humble leaders—the ones least likely to tout themselves as heroic, and most likely to point to the strengths of their team as making their outfit successful---are often the best (provided they have a fierce determination to succeed).

3. Certainty in Direction: The Necessity of a Vision or Mission

One variable in the growth of a leader comes from having a clear vision or a mission to throw themselves into achieving. Research from the science of military leadership is clear: Without a clear mission or objective to accomplish, motivation is not whole-hearted, resources get squandered, and responsibility is diffused. Yet when there is a clear mission or objective to which personnel are committed, motivation is high, resourcefulness is robust, and responsibility is

readily shouldered. The vision or mission is NOT a merely a “statement”, but must be an understanding of “here’s our goal, here’s how we can get there, and here’s what we will achieve for ourselves and others by doing it.” (And when people can contribute to the creation of the mission and vision, they are all the more likely to buy into it, though it must be remembered that not all have the strategic intuition to actually “see” such a vision initially.) People need to believe that what they are doing is contributing to something greater; in other words, work has to have meaning. They need to know that the path they are on is going to help them get there; in other words, there needs to be “line-of-sight” clarity between activity and overall goals. And they need to feel that their role is important to that achievement. Without the certainty that comes from understanding the direction of organizational intent, it is hard for any emerging leader to unlock their own potential, or the potential of those around them.

4. Breaking Inertia: The Value of Significant Events

Most of adult life is ruled by habit. By the time we are about 30, much of our preferences are habitually established for using our mental processes, deploying our physical body, and managing our emotions as we navigate through life. Habits are useful, in that they help us “automate” much of the complexity of life. Yet those habits also get in our way, creating unnecessary resistance to changing our behavior in service to our mission. In order to break free from the ones that “trap us,” we must do something to interrupt them. And my experience has shown me that almost all manager-leaders have habits that trap them from better leadership. Due to the rule of habits, it takes some significant event to shake us out of our routine, and to provide a fresh “starting point” for change. The secret to making this starting point useful is if it has emotional intensity. If it requires the same-old brain-wave patterns that are common to day-to-day “success,” then you can bet that it is not going to be a significant event, and therefore will not break inertia. The half-life of this sort of thing is 2 days. Yet IF the event is scary, out-of-the-ordinary, and in some way emotionally uplifting (if it gives us “hope”), then it will likely serve as a new milestone in the journey to better leadership.

5. The Hidden Dynamic of Motivation: Aligning Needs with Goals

Everyone NEEDS a livelihood. Those employed by others exchange their expertise and effort in exchange for compensation. And they are probably compensated fairly equitably (in most companies) at a market rate equivalent to their value-contribution. But this exchange is merely a transaction. It does NOT motivate or inspire people to do something greater than the exchange. It doesn’t satisfy the need people feel for passion and

6. Championing the Cause

7. Teams, Work Groups, and Communities of Interest: Mutual Support and Modeling

8. Making Change Stick

9. Maintaining Momentum

Some researchers maintain that it takes 21 days to “make or break a habit.” This may be true in some cases, but is overly simplistic. In reality, IF you could practice a certain habit for 21 days straight, with intensity and support, THEN you probably could establish a new habit. However, for many aspects of leadership, and in our complex lives, this is impractical, if not impossible.

10. Barriers and Pitfalls

11. Benchmarking and Mileposts

12. Alignment & Mis-Alignment of Person and Role– Hitting the Sweet Spot vs. Squandered Talent

NOTE: Leadership Rule of Thumb:

- Put a Good Person under a Bad Leader and they Stagnate or Regress;*
- Put a Bad Person under a Good Leader and they Progress;*
- Put a Good Person Under an Emerging Leader, and they May Emerge Too;*
- Put a Good Person under a Good Leader and they Become Good Leaders Too.*