

Lessons For Leaders

In the course of a multi-decade career, it has been my privilege to work with- and for some terrific leaders. These people demonstrated the essential behaviors that make leaders great. They were generous with their time, but more importantly, they taught by example.

Leadership roles are now transitioning to the next generation. I see so many younger people thrust into these roles without having had the benefit of this kind of mentoring that was once so common. So, I decided to write this to try and distill the core principles that have served me so well over the years.

I claim none of this as my own. I'm just a scribbler that took time to format the great notes given to me ...

Who Is A Leader?

We've come to think of leaders as people who are *CEOs* or *Senior Vice President Of Nothing Important* or some other lofty title. Implicit in every young person's first promotion to *Manager 1st Class* is the message, "NOW, you are a leader."

This is nonsense. In fact, it's a corrosive idea. First of all, you manage *things*, but you lead *people, ideas, and strategies*. Management - even when done at the highest levels - is essentially glorified bookkeeping. Yes, it's necessary bookkeeping, but that's all it is. It has been my misfortune to see more than a few "great" managers who were fundamentally lousy leaders. This ends up being destructive to the organization and bad for that manager's professional development.

Secondly, title and pecking order do not correlate directly with leadership. It is certainly true that the higher up you move in an organization, the more "leadership" responsibility accrues to you. But it does not follow that your new title magically makes you a leader, let alone a good one.

The truth is that leaders are people that ... exhibit leadership behaviors. And here's the great thing, *they exist at every level of the organization*. There are leaders to be found among administrative assistants, bookkeepers, engineers, teachers, soccer moms, and retail clerks.

The point is that your title doesn't make you a leader. *Your title sets the expectation that you will exhibit the behaviors of a leader.*

The Lessons

Great Leaders Have Permission

Whatever your title, past accomplishments or educational pedigree, your people have to give you their permission to be led. This is a matter of trust. The Board Of Directors may have just anointed you CEO and Chairman, but if your people do not find you worthy of their trust, you will fail.

Trust is not built all at once, but great leaders exhibit daily behaviors that - over time - create a deep reservoir of trust. This is incredibly important when times are bad. People will hang in there with you if you've proven yourself to be trustworthy. They'll do this even if their jobs are horrible at the moment, or the raises are lousy, or there have been RIFs and so on.

The inverse is really terrible. When people do not trust their leaders, they don't necessarily quit. More usually, they just take their foot off the gas, or in the most pathological cases, they will practice what

I call "Malicious Obedience". They will do *exactly* what they are told, even though it's the wrong thing. The feedback paths every leader needs to succeed will dry up and the wheels will come off the organization.

I've seen more than one putative leader - even some fairly good ones - watch their organization implode because their behaviors did not instill trust.

Great Leaders Have Unimpeachable Integrity

Trust begins with one thing: Integrity. Leaders usually cannot say everything people want to know. But when great leaders speak, you always know it is the truth, or at least the truth as they understand it. People will forgive mistakes, but they will not forgive a lack of integrity.

Our larger culture is adrift exactly because there has been so much lying, cheating, and stealing going on that people don't trust the leadership of our core institutions. We are in the tragic situation of people questioning the integrity of their government, their business leaders, their legal institutions, and even their clergy.

Great leaders shine precisely because they will never, ever stoop to these behaviors. They are tough and relentless in their demands on their people, but those people know - without a doubt - that the leader in question is indisputably honest. Large or small, anything less than this will destroy anyone who aspires to lead.

Great Leaders Are Stewards And Servants

We think of leaders as being "The Boss" ... and they often are. But no matter how senior, how important, how accomplished, or how wealthy they are, the greatest leaders I've ever worked with see their jobs as being stewards of their organizations. They *serve* their company, their stockholders, and their employees.

These things show up in small ways. I've had the President of the company - whom I worked for at the time - offer to get me coffee because I was nose down in a hard problem. I've seen one of the most powerful business execs on the planet pick up the phone to call the wife of an employee who was very ill - even though that employee was 5 levels down the organization. This wasn't gladhanding or for PR. It was done in private because the CEO knew that they were a steward and servant and that lady needed comfort.

There is no more repulsive a corporate hack than the person who thinks they're more important because they have a title. *Title gives you more responsibility, it doesn't make you more important.*

Oh, that reservoir of trust? It gets deep really fast when people see their leaders acting like stewards and servants.

Great Leaders Think Strategy First

Great leaders tend to naturally bubble up in organizations, incrementally taking on more and more responsibility. As this happens, they start offloading the day-to-day minutiae of the work and start focusing on larger, systemic issues. Instead of focusing on "Why didn't we ship that on time?", they work on things like, "How do we improve our processes?" or "Are we structured for success?" or "With whom should we partner?"

Steve Case at AOL famously said words to the effect of "Vision without execution is an hallucination." There is no question that execution has to be the bedrock of any organization. But great leaders focus on the larger, meta issues that impede execution systemically.

How much time are your people spending on needless paperwork? Have you even asked them? How many of your processes are masking accountability? Can you even tell? How much time do people spend positioning politically? Have you noticed? These are the kinds of larger process and structural issues that great leaders focus on first.

Great Leaders Are In Sales

If a great leader has a strategic mind, they have the heartbeat of a salesperson. Whether it's the CEO trying to grow customer revenue, the CTO trying to implement a new mission critical system, or the VP of HR trying to get an employee wellness program funded, *real leaders are always selling something*.

Many people are of the opinion that sales is about taking people to ball games, wining and dining them, slapping them on the back, and getting them to buy something. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just like buildings or computer systems, effective sales has an "architecture" to it. Central to that architecture is that *a sale can only be made when both parties realize significant value from the deal*. Great leaders - at every level - know this. Their strategic thinking sets the direction, but their salesmanship exposes the value of their ideas.

Show me a CEO who isn't constantly in front of customers and I'll show you a failing CEO. That's sort of obvious. But how about the VP Of Technology who isn't bothering to explain the value of a new system to their most junior engineers? How about the Director Of Finance who never explains the difference between expense and capital burn - and why it matters how people report their time? Silly? Perhaps. But these are all "selling" and they're fundamentally important.

Great Leaders Color Outside The Lines

The greatest leaders I've ever known manage to be positive while selling ideas that are just looney on their face. They get people to follow them into ventures that "will never work", to try things that have never been done before, and to do exactly those things everyone says cannot be done. Great leaders do this based on a supreme confidence in their own strategic vision and a willingness to fail trying new things. They don't quite know *how* they'll pull it off, they just have an instinct that they can.

Amazingly, people are just *drawn* to these kinds of leaders. Who wants to go work for Boring Co. when you have a chance at breaking the laws of physics? What you inevitably see a few years down the road, is an organization that's done way, way more than they would have otherwise.

Great Leaders Change Direction

We all have some philosophy of life, work, politics, and so on. One of the hallmarks of great leaders is that they don't get stuck in their own philosophical rut. *Great leaders allow Reality to intrude upon their ideas*. You may have the greatest strategic vision since Eisenhower invaded Normandy, but if it's not getting traction, it's time to let Reality modify your vision and direction.

You see this all the time in politics. People get elected by identifying with some party or ideological stance. They get into office and just cling to that ideology even when it's not remotely working. It's a kind of leadership arrogance to believe that your ideas are more powerful than Reality.

I have watched more than one organization fail because it's leaders clung to their vision, refused to change direction, and lost entire markets and new opportunities. Ask any good investor and they'll tell you, "You have to shoot your dogs." You get rid of underperforming investments. Great leaders shoot their dog ideas.

Great Leaders Are Often Lost And Lonely

Leaders carry a mantle of great responsibility. With it comes a large body of information. Leaders know things other people don't ... and it gets lonely. That employee everyone is complaining about? The one that used to do such good work and now is late all the time? You can't tell everyone he's dying of incurable cancer. The big merger that will cause you to have to RIF 20% of the workforce? You can't say a word. Great leaders understand that loneliness is a cost of leadership. They balance it with other behaviors like mentoring and community outreach, but they never complain about the burden. It goes with the territory.

It's worth noting that bad leaders crack under the pressure and start sharing these confidences with their inner circle to try and relieve the stress of it all. When they do this, that reservoir of trust starts to

drain pretty quickly. If the CEO shares some personal matter about one of your peers with you, what confidence do you have that he won't share *your* details with someone else?

Great leaders are often lost. I once had my boss tell me, "I feel so lost most of the time. All these people depend on me and I often haven't got a clue." That's perfect! It's exactly where you ought to be. Remember that strategic mind? By the very definition of leading to new places, leaders *are* lost. They're supposed to be. Great leaders embrace the fact that they're lost in the woods. In fact, they'll tell you they are not remotely lost. They're just exploring. One of the essential hallmarks of great leadership is the willingness to go places and use methods no one else has tried. Being "lost" is a sign that you're doing this.

Great Leaders Foster Constructive Argument

In my early career, the corporate culture was "We know what we're doing. We have policies and processes. Do as you're told." (Everyone chomped at the bit to become a manager so they could be the ones doing the telling.) This central command and control model nearly obliterated a lot of top tier corporate brands in the next several decades. A lot of bottom up intelligence wasn't making into the hands of the leadership.

Great leaders encourage vigorous, constructive confrontation at all levels of the organization. They see themselves as referees ensuring that the process is fair and productive. They intervene when the conflict becomes personal or otherwise unprofessional. This is not to say that everyone gets a vote. But confrontation with integrity creates a much larger marketplace of ideas from which to draw.

This has another huge benefit. When you watch people in a conflict of ideas, *the next generation of leaders is showing up*. Great leaders are passionate. "Put me in coach. Give me the ball." When you foster responsible organizational conflict, these people appear naturally because smart, driven people want to be part of the discussion.

Great Leaders Can Identify Bricks And Mortar

There are generally two kinds of people in any organization. Some people are "bricks". They are the foundation upon which the organization is built. They are the day-to-day workers who get their jobs done well with a minimum of delay or drama. Like bricks, they are durable, they are dependable, and they require minimal maintenance.

Then there are the "mortar" employees. Mortar employees are organizational glue, they hold things together. They cross corporate boundaries effortlessly. They move both across and up- and down the org chart. They are every command and control manager's worst nightmare. A good part of the time, you have no idea what they're actually doing. Like mortar in a wall, there are far fewer of these than bricks and they can be much higher maintenance.

Great leaders can identify these kinds of people instinctively. They groom the bricks for more and more execution responsibility. They cling to the mortar as the next generation of leadership. Great leaders invest especially heavily in their mortar employees. They mentor them, they push their boundaries, and they place higher demands upon them. Usually, mortar folks are given leadership long before they're ready for it ... but that's exactly what they thrive on.

Great Leaders Share Success But Take The Blame

Leadership is fundamentally about getting people to follow you as you make decisions over incomplete information. You're asking the organization to take risk with you. Since great leaders have that reservoir of trust, they get to ask for this and they usually get it.

When the risk pays off, *great leaders shine the light on their people, not themselves..* "We took a risk, and YOU people made it pay off." One of the signs of a great leader is their language. They use the word "we" a lot. Lousy leaders say "I" when explaining things. Listen, especially to very public leaders like national politicians or Fortune 100 CEOs. You can immediately spot the leaders and sniff out the egomaniacs.

Oh, and that integrity thing? People can spot gladhanding in a heartbeat. When a great leader says "Good Job!", people warm to it. When an insincere corporate drone does it, people snicker behind their backs and mock them.

When risk taking fails, great leaders take the blame. They do not yell at their people, they do not scream, they do not curse. They sit down with their teams and ask "Why did this fail? What can we learn from this? What should we do differently next time?" Great leaders understand that failure can be a prelude to success because it is a learning moment. Their strategic thinking begins to recalculate that new direction based on the learning the failure brings.

In The End ...

There is no one model for leaders. They come in many flavors. But these core behaviors show up time after time across industries, disciplines, and institutions. Notice that none of these have much to do with personality or temperament. They are practiced by the most flamboyant and the most reserved of leaders. More importantly, they are manifested at every level of a high function organization. Great leaders not only demonstrate these behaviors, they cultivate them throughout their organization.

I have been most fortunate to be exposed to people like this pretty much from the beginning of my career. It's my deepest hope that these ideas continue to have currency into the next generation of leadership.

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