
Truth Five

You Can’t Do It Alone

You might get the impression from what we’ve written so far that leadership is all about the leader. That’d be understandable, since we’ve talked about how leaders have to believe in themselves, how followers have to believe in their leaders, how leaders have to be clear about their values, and how leaders separate themselves from individual contributors with their visions of the future. All of this is true, but the reason it’s true is because leaders are here to serve others, and not the other way around.

The Truth Is That You Can’t Do It Alone. We learned this early in our research when Bill Flanagan, then manufacturing director for Amdahl Corporation, told us that he couldn’t tell us about his personal best. We were
quite surprised by his response, and we asked him why. Bill replied, "Because it wasn’t my personal best. It was our personal best. It wasn’t me, it was us." That was in 1984. In 2009 in Hong Kong, Eric Pan, regional head of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants in South China, told us essentially the same thing when talking about his personal best leadership experience. "No matter how capable a leader is," Eric said, "he or she alone won’t be able to deliver a large project or program without the joint efforts and synergies that come from the team."

Twenty-five years and half a world apart, Bill and Eric—and the thousands of other leaders who’ve told us their stories—remind us all that no leader single-handedly ever gets anything extraordinary done. We’re absolutely certain that in another twenty-five years when someone asks a leader to share his or her personal best story, he or she will say exactly the same thing. Leadership is a team sport. There may be a captain, but without the team working together no one can score the winning goal.

Look at it this way. How do you know someone is a leader? While there are several hundred definitions of leadership in the academic literature, the simplest way to know is just to look to see whether that person has followers. If you think you’re a leader and you turn around and no one is following you, then you’re simply out for a walk.

YOU HAVE TO MAKE A HUMAN CONNECTION

Leadership is not about the leader per se. It is not about you alone. It’s about the relationship between leaders and their constituents. It’s about the connection you and your teammates have with each other. It’s about how you behave and feel toward each other. It’s about the emotional bond that exists between you and them. Exemplary leaders know that they must attend to the needs, and focus on the capabilities, of their constituents if they are going to get extraordinary things done.

The Center for Creative Leadership found that the critical success factor for the top three jobs in organizations is "relationships with subordinates." Similar studies on leadership and emotional intelligence done by Daniel Goleman and others validate this finding.2 Human connection is a fact of life. Claudio Fernandez-Araoz, a former partner and now senior advisor in the executive search firm of Egon Zehnder International, has personally conducted several hundred senior executive search projects, and as the former director of Egon Zehnder International’s professional development for their fifty-eight offices worldwide, he was exposed to several thousand hiring cases. He told us that all this evidence . . .
clearly demonstrated that the classic profile organizations look for in hiring a senior executive (relevant experience and outstanding IQ) is much more a predictor of failure than success, unless the relevant emotional intelligence competencies are also present. In fact, serious weaknesses in the domain of emotional intelligence predict failure at senior levels with amazing accuracy.\textsuperscript{3}

This is serious stuff. You can graduate at the top of the class from the best business schools in the world; reason circles around your brightest peers; solve technical problems with wizard-like powers; have the relevant situational, functional, and industry experience; and still be more likely to fail than succeed—unless you also possess the requisite personal and social skills. The mandate is very clear. Build your own and your team members’ abilities to work with each other. Doing this well will have a direct impact on your personal and organizational success.

YOU HAVE TO HEAR WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

So often leadership is associated with inspirational speaking, but people often miss the fact that making the human connection requires exceptional listening. You have to understand the perspective of others, and that ability has been shown to be the most glaring difference between successful and unsuccessful leaders.\textsuperscript{4}

Sensitivity to others’ needs is a truly precious human ability. But it is not a complex act. It simply means spending time with people on the factory floor or in the showroom or warehouse or back room. It means being acutely aware of the attitudes and feelings of others and the nuances of their communication.

It’s about intimacy. It’s about familiarity. It’s about empathy. This kind of communication requires understanding constituents at a much deeper level than most people normally find comfortable. It requires understanding others’ strongest yearnings and their deepest fears. It requires a profound awareness of their joys and their sorrows. It requires experiencing life as they experience it.

When you listen, when you hear, and when you truly understand the needs of your constituents, you will connect with them in ways that an out-of-touch leader cannot. You will make a primal connection. “The leader acts as the group’s emotional guide,” write Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee in Primal Leadership. They go on to say that the primordial task of leadership is “driving the collective emotions in a positive direction and clearing the emotional smog created by toxic emotions.”\textsuperscript{5}

When leaders are in tune with the emotions of others, they create resonance between leader and constituent
and among constituents, much like the musicians in an orchestra create resonance when their instruments are in tune. Insensitive, tone-deaf leaders drive negative emotions and create dissonance in a group. This discord is highly destructive to the group’s functioning. Only resonant leaders generate the amplification that enables groups to produce exceptional results.

**UNITE PEOPLE AROUND A SHARED VISION**

One of the most powerful internal motivators on the planet is a sense of meaning and purpose. Throughout human history people have risked life, security, and wealth for something that is greater than themselves. People want a chance to take part in something meaningful and important. There is a deep human yearning to make a difference. People want to know that there is a purpose to their existence. They want to know that their lives mean something. A significant part of the leader’s job is uncovering and reflecting back the meaning that others seek.

Leadership is very much a two-way street. As Elaine Fan, food scientist at National Starch Food Innovation, explains:

> You must understand the needs of your followers. I have never encountered a circumstance in which leadership was a one-way street. You won’t be a leader for very long if you only do what you want to do. In all of my group meetings, no one has ever been successful in just ordering others around to achieve only one person’s goals. The most efficient and successful groups that I have been a part of have been when one person takes the lead while asking everyone else their opinions. The leader merely coordinates and puts into action the wants and desires of the group. A leader must know and understand the needs of the rest of the group or soon he/she won’t be leading anyone.

When listening with sensitivity to the aspirations of others, as Elaine advises, you can discover the common values that link people together. And by knowing those aspirations, you are able to stand before others and say with assurance: “Here is what I heard you say that you want for yourselves. Here is how your own needs and interests will be served by enlisting in a common purpose.”

You have to know your constituents, and you have to speak to them in language they will find engaging. If you’re trying to mobilize people to move in a particular direction, then you’ve got to talk about that future destination in ways that others find appealing to them. It’s got to be something that they care about as much as, or even more than, you do.
Truly inspirational leadership is not about selling a vision; it’s about showing people how the vision can directly benefit them and how their specific needs can be satisfied. Leaders must be able to sense the purpose in others. What people really want to hear is not the leader’s vision. They want to hear about how their own aspirations will be met. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be realized. They want to see themselves in the picture of the future that the leader is painting. The very best leaders understand that it’s about inspiring a shared vision, not about selling their own idiosyncratic views of the world.

The vast majority of people want to walk with their leaders. They want to dream with them. They want to invent with them. They want to be involved in creating their own futures. This means that you have to stop taking the view that visions come from the top down. You have to stop seeing it as a monologue, and you have to start engaging others in a collective dialogue about the future.  

MAKE OTHERS FEEL STRONG AND CAPABLE

Because extraordinary achievements don’t result simply from the actions of the leader, it is critical that you build a team of people who feel powerful and capable of taking action. That’s precisely what we find in our research when we ask people to describe their relationships with the leader they most admire and look up to. They tell us that when they are with this leader they feel empowered, listened to, understood, capable, important, like they mattered, challenged to do more, and other similar descriptors. The overwhelming sense we get from reviewing thousands and thousands of these responses is that the best leaders take actions that make people strong and capable. They make people feel that they can do more than they thought they could. One of the reasons people want to follow a leader is because they know that they will be better off as a result of being in that relationship than they would be otherwise.

There’s a famous restaurant scene in the Academy Award-winning film *As Good As It Gets*, where Carol (portrayed by actress Helen Hunt) becomes so exasperated with Melvin (portrayed by actor Jack Nicholson) that she finally gets up from the table and is ready to leave. Melvin looks at her quite stunned. He has no idea that he’s just insulted her. He asks her to sit down, and she responds, “Melvin, pay me a compliment. I need one and quick. You have no idea how much what you said just hurt my feelings.”

Melvin is put on the spot. He mutters something and Carol tells him that it’s not a compliment. She demands, “Now or never.” Melvin pauses for a moment, and then
says to Carol: "You make me want to be a better man." Carol is so astonished by this remark that she exclaims: "I think this is about the best compliment of my life." 9

Now think about what Melvin was really saying: "As a result of this relationship I'm a better person. And I want to be in this relationship with you because being in this relationship makes me better off than I would be on my own." Put this into an organizational context, and think about how important it is to know that your manager believes in you, supports you, and will back you up. The same goes for your constituents. They want to know that you'll make them better off than they are.

In fact, that's what Jerry Zhang, associate director, auto business, Guangdong Yi Hang Enterprise Development, told us about strengthening others:

We cannot just throw the work to people without helping them to do it. We must know the person. We must give him confidence. We must let him know what he will learn from the work, and that this will make him feel more competent and better able to achieve a more difficult task.

For example, there was a financial manager in my company. When he first joined the company he was assigned to do the budget for next year. He absolutely was good at budgeting, but he did not know very well the industry which he had just entered. I spent a lot of time sharing industry information and operating processes with him.

Together we also went out and visited the market many times to help him know more about the industry. As a result the work was well done.

Getting people to feel capable and confident, and to act like leaders themselves, requires making an investment in their personal development, which is what Sharon Miao, project engineer at Lexmark International, reported. She told us about how she helped one of the engineers on her team get promoted. She described him as very experienced, with good technical knowledge and skills, but that his oral English was not very good. Based on her observations she felt that, while his English knowledge level was good enough, he wasn’t very confident about speaking in English. He was "too shy," she said. She took a series of deliberate actions to help him develop his confidence and skills speaking in English. When he was subsequently promoted, the new manager told Sharon that "he would have been promoted much sooner if his oral English ability was as good as it was now."

From this experience Sharon learned how important it is to truly believe that your direct reports can be better, and that, as a leader, you need to convince them of their potential. Often, people just lack a little courage and confidence. They blossom when they have a leader who believes in them and gives them support and encouragement.
BRING IT OUT OF OTHERS

John Hamm, entrepreneur, CEO, venture capitalist, and leadership educator at Santa Clara University, explains that many leaders fall into the trap of thinking that it's their responsibility to be the one who has all the answers. This puts you into, he says:

... a very lonely, isolated position where information becomes unreliable and useful input is stifled. Effective leaders, by contrast, understand that their role is to bring out the answers in others. They do this by very clearly and explicitly seeking contributions, challenges, and collaboration from the people who report to them, using their positional power not to dominate but rather to drive the decision-making process.¹⁰

Rather than thinking that you have all the answers, you need to be able to ask great questions. Great questions send people on pioneering journeys in their minds. They're a lot more likely to discover novel ideas when you set them free to explore on their own. The answers are out there, and they will be found among your constituents as long as people feel safe in offering them. Ask your colleagues to read about your industry and field, especially stories about what other innovative companies are doing, and ask why this isn't being done in your organization. What are they hearing from their colleagues who do business in this area? What are the next things that should be focused on? What are the stumbling blocks ahead?

Asking questions is just one way that you can communicate that you believe in other people's abilities. Giving them choices, providing them with discretion over how things are done, and fostering accountability are others. People want to feel in charge of their own lives. They want to be in control. They want to determine their own destinies. They want to know that their input matters, that their ideas are good ones, that their answers are correct, and that their decisions will be supported. It's your job as a leader to increase people's sense of self-determination, self-confidence, and personal effectiveness.

High-quality relationships don't happen spontaneously. They require leadership. It's your job to interact with others in ways that promote connection, collaboration, confidence, and competence. When you do, you'll see learning, innovation, and performance soar.

The Truth Is That You Can't Do It Alone. Leaders alone don't make anything great. Leadership is a shared responsibility. You need others, and they need you.
You're all in this together. To build and sustain that sense of oneness, exemplary leaders are sensitive to the needs of others. They ask questions. They listen. They provide support. They develop skills. They ask for help. They align people in a common cause. They make people feel like anything is possible. They connect people to their need to be in charge of their own lives. They enable others to be even better than they already are.

In a 2009 international study, the majority of people said they trust a stranger more than they trust their boss.¹

Think about what this finding means if you're a manager. It means that there's a good chance that the people you lead are less likely to trust you than to trust someone they simply walked by on the way to work.

Think about what this means to your credibility. Credibility is the foundation of leadership, we've said, and trustworthiness is an essential component of credibility. This means that if people don't trust you, they won't believe what you say.

Think about what it means to the organization's performance. High-trust organizations have been shown to outperform low-trust organizations by 286 percent in