

HUMAN RESOURCE ASSOCIATES

HR Consultants to Management

PERSONNEL NOTEBOOK

For Your Most Important Resource

DOES ANYONE WANT TO BE LED BY YOU?

Examples of great leadership can be found everywhere. My personal favorite is the story of President John F. Kennedy at an address before a joint session of Congress in May of 1961, just four months into his presidency. He shocked his audience and the world by setting the audacious goal of sending a man to the moon and returning him to Earth by the end of the decade.

Kennedy didn't try to solve all of the space program's enormous new technical, political, and financial problems in advance. He did, however, create the vision, the challenge, and the timetable. Then, he gave those who could do it the power, the means, and the freedom to get it done and got out of their way. That's leadership.

There are many good views and opinions from many people about what leadership is, how to find it, attract it, retain it, and best use it. To you, the most important issue may be whether or not you are one of those leaders. But, the even larger issue is whether anyone wants to be led by you.

This question often strikes fear in the hearts of executives, and with good reason. You can't

lead unless someone follows. Leaders can't get anything done without followers to carry out their direction. And, in these "empowered times," followers are hard to find — except by leaders who know how to capture people's hearts, minds, and spirits. So, how do you get followers?

Everyone agrees that leaders need vision, energy, authority, and strategic direction. But, inspirational leaders need something more.

Robert Goffee and Garth Jones, in an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, presented the results of their 25 years of research and theory testing on thousands of executives, and they recommend the following four qualities for leaders to magnetize people to their vision:

1. Be human; reveal your weaknesses.
2. Be intuitive; become a sensor.
3. Practice tough empathy.
4. Dare to be different.

1. Be Human; Reveal Your Weaknesses

When leaders reveal their weaknesses, they show us who they are, warts and all. This may mean that they're irritable on Monday mornings or somewhat disorganized or even shy. Admitting such weaknesses helps establish trust, and, in some ways, imparts confidence. Indeed, trying to establish perfection at everything tells folks there's little need to help you with anything. It's a signal that you can do it all yourself.

Consider the experience of a senior executive who has a medical condition that regularly produces physical shaking. He agreed to give a major presentation at a global management consultancy. The otherwise highly critical audience greeted this courageous display of weakness with a standing ovation. By giving this talk, he had dared to say, "I am just like you, imperfect." Sharing this imperfection is so effective because it underscores a person's authenticity.

All that said, effective leaders know that exposing a weakness must be done carefully. The golden rule is to never expose a weakness that will be seen as a major flaw. For example, a VP of finance cannot suddenly confess that he never understood discounted cash flow. A "better" weakness to expose may be that you're a workaholic. But remember, if your revealed weakness is not perceived as genuine, you'll open yourself to ridicule and even scorn.

2. Be Intuitive; Become a Sensor

Inspirational leaders rely heavily on their intuition. Although this is a trait people generally have or don't have, many become intuitive to their specific environment. Ray van Shaik, chairman of Heinekin in the early 1990s, is a good example. Van Shaik's genius, it was said, lay in his ability to read specific signals he received from his colleagues and from Freddie Heinekin, the family member who was "always

there without being there." This was because van Shaik developed an ability to "just know" what Heinekin wanted. While other executives second-guessed and hoped for the best, van Shaik's, who had spent many years working with Heinekin on the board, worked at and honed this sixth sense.

Being able to read nonverbal signals and striving to understand the values and goals of others will begin to give you the sense of knowing what's going on without having everything spelled out.

One successful leader shared that when he was younger, he worked as a tour guide responsible for groups of 100 or more people. "There was no salary, only tips," he recalls. He developed the ability to identify which groups and which individuals would produce the best tips. Then, he focused on which techniques in his work produced even better earnings. This skill, once developed, he says, helped lead him to his current CEO position.

Great sensors can sense unexpressed feelings, judge whether relationships are working or not, and understand the "hot buttons" that can motivate individuals.

A word of warning about being intuitive, however: Contaminating your intuitive signals with your own motives can lead you and others astray. If your desire for a specific outcome is so strong it clouds your ability to cleanly perceive unfiltered signals, you may end up with a distorted message. The employee who fears for her job may also read her boss's abruptness as a signal she's going to be fired. Even the most gifted sensors may need to re-examine their own feelings, which may be interfering with their intuition. You may even want to discuss your feelings with a trusted adviser or a team member.

3. Practice Tough Empathy

Unfortunately, there's altogether too much hype telling leaders that their purpose in life is to save bad employees and become more focused on social issues. It's disappointing to see a manager return from the latest interpersonal skills training newly focused on making friends and developing social relationships. Real leaders don't need a training program to convince them they should care. They empathize fiercely with the people they lead and they care intensely about the work their employees do.

The true empathy of inspirational leaders is not the soft indulging style that's centered primarily on employees' personal issues. Real leaders manage through a unique approach called tough empathy; that is, giving people what they need, not what they want.

Organizations like the Marine Corps or consulting firms specialize in tough empathy. Recruits in the Marine Corp are pushed to be the best they can be; "grow or go" is the motto. This is not a callous disregard for the personal problems an individual may have in the performance of his or her job. Instead, it is a concerted focus on the organization's vision and goals, your team, and the development of future leaders.

At its best, tough empathy balances respect for the individual and for the task at hand. Attending to both, however, is not easy and certainly not when your business is in survival mode. At such times, real leaders draw the best and more from their people. They inspire new thought, concentrated energy, and renewed commitment. Executives who are more focused on being admired and making friends often fail everybody.

Consider a situation at Unilever at a time it was developing a new detergent that eventually

failed dramatically because it destroyed clothes while cleaning them. Even though the problems became evident early on, the CEO, Neil Fitzgerald, stood by his troops and supported them. "That was the popular place to be," he says now. "But I shouldn't have been there." "I should have been looking out for the customer." Stopping the process, even though it would have cost some people their jobs, was the right thing to do. Now they're almost all gone."

Caring for people does not always mean giving in to their wishes and keeping everything as comfortable as possible. People want and expect more from their leader. They want someone who cares passionately about the people and the work, and they want to be part of a successful team.

4. Dare to Be Different

Another quality of inspirational leaders, the authors discovered in their detailed research, is that they capitalize on what's unique about them. In fact, the research showed that of the four qualities, this might be the single most important.

Many leaders often don't know what that unique trait is, but when they identify it, the best leaders don't hide it — they emphasize it. This not only identifies and highlights who they are, but it also signals separateness that distinguishes them from other leaders.

Your difference may be a creative imagination, an ability to speak well, or an expertise in something (even if it's not job-related). It may be as simple as a handshake or a distinct style of dress. Whatever it is, find out what sets you apart and makes you an individual. Let it be an identifier for you.

After many years, one CEO found that he motivated people through his emotions in the

way he communicated. Once he identified this, he began to highlight it. Soon, others characterized him by his emotional commitment and communication style. Another leader found that being a little aloof and private had the effect of separating her from the crowd. She was not Machiavellian in her manner. She was an accomplished leader and her people took great pride in being on her team. Leadership is not a popularity contest.

One danger of course, is that an executive can overemphasize that unique quality. Some may find that their separateness becomes so pronounced they lose contact with their followers, and that's fatal. Robert Horten, former CEO of British Petroleum, reportedly projected a conspicuous display of considerable intelligence. So much so, that he led others to see him as arrogant. That excessive separateness eventually led to his dismissal after just three years.

Leadership in Action

Based on their findings, Goffee and Jones have determined that all four of these qualities are necessary for leadership, but they cannot be used mechanically. They must be or become a part of who and what you are. That's why "recipe books" on leadership so seldom work. The qualities do not become part of the individual. No one can become a leader just by aping another leader. The challenge is to be yourself and to incorporate these four qualities.

As long as we have businesses with people who work together, we will be looking for leaders and discovering all we can about true leadership. This research provides no universal formula, but it can and has, identified significant qualities of those we already recognize as true leaders. This can be a very good first step in developing yourself as a leader.

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