

The Basics for Effective Leadership Are Really Pretty Basic

by Tom Pickens

"The job of management is not supervision, but leadership. The required transformation of Western style of management requires that managers be leaders."

These words were written by W. Edwards Deming, the internationally renowned management consultant who brought quality control to Japanese industry. Deming was one of the first to see that traditional Western management practices were on a collision course with a new kind of reality brought about by eager-beaver competition from every corner of the world.

The times are turbulent. Things are changing fast. Clearly there is a need for leaders who are comfortable with change and know how "to make the most of it. An executive at the Center for Creative Leadership says this is a skill akin to shooting rapids. "You have to be able to see the connections and patterns in the waves."

The only problem is "leadership" is a word that is far easier to invoke than achieve.

How does one make oneself a leader? What constitutes good leadership? And how does one learn to see the connections and patterns in the waves?

The answers aren't easy, but they are important.'

The need for good leadership is recognized everywhere. More than 600 colleges and graduate schools offer courses in some sort of leadership training. Almost as many management consulting firms offer seminars, which can be staged either in your own company or at the consulting firm's facilities, often a sabbatical retreat in a scenic area such as Hawaii or the Rocky Mountains. They are run by people like Tom Peters, the author of *Thriving on Chaos* (an ability he recommends today's aspiring leaders learn in a hurry).

The leadership training these seminars offer covers a full spectrum of disciplines. You could end up scaling cliffs (the "personal growth" school of leadership, offered by firms like the Pecos River Learning Center in Santa Fe, N.M.). Or, you could practice strategic planning in a simulated business environment at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C. This nonprofit organiza-

tion emphasizes the "feedback" school of leadership, which teaches you to become aware of how you impact others. To do this, they videotape you in action in a risk-free environment so that you can see your strengths and weaknesses.

Look before You Leap

There are any number of approaches to leadership training, and some of them can be pretty pricey. Before you spring for the tuition for some of these leadership sabbaticals, you might want to test the waters first by reading the books written by the people running the seminars.

A voluminous literature has grown around the topic of leadership. Go to the management section of any bookstore, and you will find dozens of books on leadership.

More than 600 institutions offer leadership training seminars. With some of those focusing on "personal growth," you might even end up scaling ladders.

Interestingly enough, if you peruse several of these tomes, you will discover that almost all of these writers are saying the same thing. They may use different terminology and buzzwords to describe the process, but all agree that three elements are essential to effective leadership:

- (1) The leader must have a vision.
- (2) The leader must get everybody in the organization involved in pursuing the vision, and make them feel they are an important part of the process.
- (3) The leader must listen to what people are saying.

These three concepts are always present no matter what vocabulary the authors use. Get them firmly in mind, and you may absorb all the accumulated wisdom of a seminar costing several thousands of dollars.

Sounds almost too simple. If these three elements are the basis of effective leadership, why isn't everybody using them, and why aren't there more outstanding leaders?

Because these three innocent-sounding concepts involve a new kind of thinking. They

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SCOTT POLLACK

yank the rag out from under some cherished management traditions. You have to be able to swallow a little future shock to use them effectively.

Three Basic Techniques for Effective Leadership

Have a vision.

W. Edwards Deming believed absolutely in the power of vision. The very first of his famous 14 points for creating quality says, "Create and publish to all employees a statement of the aims and purposes of the company or other organization. The management must demonstrate constantly their commitment to this statement."

In other words, if you run up a banner that says, "This is who we are, this is what we stand for," people will understand and respond. Build a "Field of Dreams" and they will come.

"In the 1990s . . . if you're not thinking all the time about making every person more valuable, you don't have a chance."

-Jack Welch

The vision can be as simple as "We are dedicated to building the best quality widget," or "We are dedicated to building the best quality widget cleaning service," but it's got to be there in a way people can understand and believe.

Post the mission statement on the walls, put it in your training manuals, hammer the point home in every meeting.

Get everybody involved,

In G.E. CEO Jack Welch's book, *Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will*, he writes: "I think any company that's trying to play in the 1990s has got to find a way to engage the mind of every single employee. If you're not thinking all the time about making every person more valuable, you don't have a chance."

One of the biggest problems many companies have is that their employees feel alienated. The goal of leaders is to eliminate the feeling of powerlessness in each individual, the mindset that says, "It's not my problem; I can't do anything about it."

You've got to make everybody feel that they are part of the problem-solving process and that they *can* do something about it. Leaders have to create a climate in which individuals can act on their own to get things done. It may look a little like anarchy by normal managerial standards, but the payoff is on the bottom line. You have to develop the creative management potential of everybody on the payroll.

"We look upon a leader as a coach who shares assignments with lots of other people," says one executive. "The decision-making process has to move out into the organization." Or as Tom Peters puts it, "You have to get line workers involved in everything from budgets to quality control."

Listen to people.

Listen to everybody. Listen to customers. Listen to people on the production line. This may be the biggest hurdle of all for a "manager" to clear. Managers are not accustomed to listening. They are accustomed to issuing directives and having them obeyed. But everybody who has ever studied the problem of leadership agrees that good leaders listen to what other people have to contribute. Effective leaders have a respect for, and an interest in, people. Listening to people is an effective way to get them involved in the problem-solving process.

Listening is a way to absorb new information, and act on it. And good information is important. "However long we may drag our feet, we will be forced to accept that information — freely generated and freely exchanged — is our only hope for organization," says Berkana Institute President Margaret J. Wheatley in her book, *Leadership and the New Science*. "If we fail to recognize its generative properties, we will be unable to manage in this new world".

After You've Got Those Down Pat...

At the Center for Creative Leadership, communications Vice President John Alexander adds two more characteristics to the leadership mix "Continuous learning and self-awareness. They're both very important. You have to learn new things in order to come up with new ideas. And you have to have a good view of yourself in order to lead others."

The Center believes in taking its own medicine. It revises its courses and publications constantly, based on things it learns observing people reacting to its own simulations.

"Some people are stuck in a particular mode. Others are very adept at leading. We concentrate on learning the skills these people have," Alexander notes.

It's All Up to You

"If it's going to be, it's up to me." This old saying accurately sums up the leadership process described in *The Oz Principle* (Prentice Hall) by Roger Connors, Tom Smith and Craig Hickman.

The authors use a unique word to describe the quality that makes an effective leader — "accountability." The word may be different, but it refers, to the same process. The authors give it a slightly different spin by placing it in



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Leaders should be able to instill the idea that everybody is part of the problem-solving process, and that they can be effective

the context of the famous American myth written by L. Frank Baum.

The Oz Principle itself is easy to understand. If you remember the story, Dorothy, the little girl from Kansas, makes a long journey to visit the Wizard of Oz, accompanied by three outlandish companions who want the wizard to give them, respectively — courage, a brain and a heart. When they reach Oz, after a series of hair-raising adventures, they discover the "wonderful" wizard is really a humbug who is incapable of bestowing any of the gifts they seek. What the wizard does do, however, is point out that each of them already unknowingly possesses these gifts.

According to the Oz Principle, people already have inside themselves the power to rise above their circumstances and obtain the results they want, if only they will make themselves accountable for getting the job done.

This sort of accountability is what the authors call "above the line" action. They divide company performance into two sections: above the line and below the line. When

you're doing everything possible to get the job done, you're operating above the line. Below the line actions justify the lack of performance rather than crying to improve it.

Below the line actions offer excuses, not accountability. "It's not my job." "No one told me what to do." "Don't blame me, it was the boss's idea." Ad infinitum, ad nauseum.

Confronted with poor results, people play blame games. They waste time and money formulating excuses for why they cannot be held accountable. They act as if they are the victims of circumstance.

Such below the line behavior not only wastes time, it ignores the real problems that exist. When people view themselves as being incapable of modifying their situations through their own actions, they are simply inviting disaster. Problems do not cure themselves, nor do they go away. Not only individuals but whole companies can operate below the line, and they find themselves, invariably, up to their ears in hot water.

The Oz Principle suggests that the way to break out of the "victim cycle" is to make yourself accountable for rising above the situation. Don't wait for the wizard to solve the problem. Solve it yourself.

Oz offers a four-step process for getting the job done: see it, own it, solve it and do it. See the problem, own the problem, solve the problem and then use the solution.

See the problem? Many people have trouble seeing a problem. They don't "see" that the world around them has changed. They don't "see" that the market for their products has changed. G.E.'s Jack Welch defines management as "looking reality straight in the eye and then acting upon it with as much speed as you can." The consequences of failing to look reality in the eye can be catastrophic. Just ask the people who manufacture mainframe computers. Or their stockholders.

Own a problem? This is a lot stickier. Many people don't even want to admit there is a problem, much less "own" it. But owning is an essential part of accountability. It is the exact opposite of "that's not part of my job description." (If you want to watch a manager levitate a foot off the ground, answer with that the next time somebody asks you a question.) "Only by accepting full ownership of all past and present behavior that has contributed to current circumstances can you hope to improve your future situation," say the authors of *The Oz Principle*.

***All journeys begin with a single step.
It's up to you to take it.
There isn't any wizard out there.***

Solve the problem? That's the hard part. It involves asking the same question over and over "What can I do to achieve the results I want?" Accountable people constantly ask what they can do to improve performance. If something isn't working, they don't point a finger of blame, they ask what can be done to make it work. They encourage feedback. Most of all, they hold themselves to the same level of accountability as everyone else. Holding yourself accountable is a way of posting your own mission statement. It provides a model for everyone within your sphere of influence.

The fourth step, do it, means exactly that. If you have the solution to the problem, put it to work. According to the authors, this entails mustering the commitment and the courage to follow through with the solution, even if it involves a lot of risk.

Or, to repeat the old saying, "If it's going to be, it's up to me."

All well and good, but how do you go

about injecting "me" into the equation to start with? In his classic book, *Thriving on Chaos*, Tom Peters reports that executives often ask him, "So what, exactly, do I do first?" His answer? "Starting this afternoon, don't walk past a shoddy product or service without comment and action . . . ever again."

The Tao of Leadership. All journeys begin with a single step. It's up to you to take it. There isn't any wizard out there.

Tom Pickens writes from New York City — Oz on the Hudson.

Leadership Readings

The Oz Principle

Roger Connors, Tom Smith, Craig Hickman j
(Preface Hail)

Argues for getting results through individual and organizational accountability, and tells how to coach it.

Values-Based Leadership

Thomas and Susan Smith Kucmarski
(Prentice Hail)

An old idea that is gaining new champions; "Describes a 12-point program any company can use to establish a shared-values initiative.

Thriving on Chaos

Tom Peters (Harper Perennial)

The title says it all. How to learn to love coping with change.

Leadership and the New Science

Margaret J. Wheatly (Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc.)

A new picture of business management, techniques based on breakthroughs in quantum physics, chaos theory and biology.

Making the Right Decision

William D. Hall (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)

Offers a simulated case history of a company facing a tough, ethical dilemma, and shows how to create a comprehensive ethics program.

The Way of Quality, Dialogues an Kaizen

Thinking

Tom Lane and Alan Green (Dialogos Press)

Kaizen is a Japanese word that means a process of continuous improvement by making small, gradual changes and getting everybody in the company involved in the process.

Principle-Centered Leadership

Stephen R. Covey (Simon and Schuster)

A principle-centered approach to developing people and organizations to increase quality and productivity.