

“The Truth About Leadership”

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We tell our audiences that as much as the context of leadership has changed, the content of leadership has not changed much at all. The fundamental behaviors, actions, and practices of leaders have remained essentially the same since we first began researching and writing about leadership over three decades ago.

Much has changed, but there's a whole lot more that's stayed the same. It became very apparent once again that the context of leading may change a lot, but the content of leading changes very little. “I don't know what you call something that's been the same for twenty-five years, but... ,” and Ken interrupted, exclaiming, “I'd call it the truth.” It was a moment of clarity. We began to see that we shouldn't be shy about saying that some things about leadership just don't change that much over time, if at all, and that those things need to be understood for what they are—the truth.

This book does not pretend to be an exhaustive list of everything you ever wanted to know about leadership. There are other truths that we are likely to uncover. In the last two years alone we've analyzed over one million responses to our Leadership Practices Inventory from over seventy countries. That's a lot of data points. We've just scratched the surface of our own data, let alone the research from others, and the evidence continues to mount.

The first truth is that You Make a Difference.

It is the most fundamental truth of all. Before you can lead, you have to believe that you can have a positive impact on others. You have to believe in yourself. That's where it all begins. Leadership begins when you believe you can make a difference

The second truth is that Credibility Is the Foundation of Leadership.

You have to believe in you, but others have to believe in you, too. What does it take for others to believe in you? Short answer: Credibility. We've said it many times, but we need to say it again, especially in these times when people have become cynical about their leaders and institutions: If people don't believe in you, they won't willingly follow you.

The third truth is that Values Drive Commitment.

People want to know what you stand for and believe in. They want to know what you value. And leaders need to know what others value if they are going to be able to forge alignments between personal values and organizational demands.

The fourth truth is that Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart.

The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is a defining competence of leaders. You have to take the long-term perspective. Gain insight from reviewing your past and develop insight by looking around. You Can't Do It Alone is

The fifth truth is that no leader ever got anything extraordinary done without the talent and support of others.

Leadership is a team sport, and you need to engage others in the cause. What strengthens and sustains the relationship between leader and constituent is that leaders are obsessed with what is best for others, not what is best for themselves.

Trust Rules is the sixth truth.

If you can't do it alone and have to rely on others, what's needed to make that happen? Trust. Trust is the social glue that holds individuals and groups together. And the level of trust others have in you will determine the amount of influence you have. You have to earn your constituents' trust before they'll be willing to trust you. That means you have to give trust before you can get trust.

The seventh truth is that Challenge Is the Crucible for Greatness.

Exemplary leaders—the kind of leaders people want to follow—are always associated with changing the status quo. Great achievements don't happen when you keep things the same. Change invariably involves challenge, and challenge tests you. It introduces you to yourself. It brings you face-to-face with your level of commitment, your grittiness, and your values. It reveals your mindset about change.

Truth number eight reminds you that You Either Lead by Example or You Don't Lead at All.

Leaders have to keep their promises and become role models for the values and actions they espouse. You have to go first as a leader. You can't ask others to do something you aren't willing to do yourself. Moreover, you have to be willing to admit mistakes and be able to learn from them.

Truth number nine is that The Best Leaders Are the Best Learners.

You have to believe that you (and others) can learn to lead, and that you can become a better leader tomorrow than you are today. Leaders are constant improvement fanatics, and learning is the master skill of leadership. Learning, however, takes time and attention, practice and feedback, along with good coaching. It also takes willingness on your part to ask for support.

The tenth truth is that Leadership Is an Affair of the Heart.

It could also be the first truth. Leaders are in love with their constituents, their customers and clients, and the mission that they are serving. Leaders make others feel important and are gracious in showing their appreciation. Love is the motivation that energizes leaders to give so much for others. You just won't work hard enough to become great if you aren't doing what you love. You can't fast-track your way to excellence. Leadership is a demanding, noble discipline not to be entered into frivolously or casually. It requires an elevated sense of mastery.

Leadership is not a birthright. It's not about position or title. It's not about power or authority. It's not about celebrity or wealth. It's not about being a CEO, president, general, or prime minister. It's not about being a superstar. And it's most assuredly not about some charismatic gift.

The numbers reveal that the behavior of leaders explains more about why people feel engaged and positive about their workplaces than any particular individual or organizational characteristic. Factors like age, gender, ethnicity, function, position, nationality, organizational size, industry, tenure, and education together account for less than 1 percent of the reason that people feel productive, motivated, energized, effective, and committed in their workplaces.

The leaders' behaviors, on the other hand, explain nearly 25 percent of the reason. Leadership is not about who you are or where you come from. It's about what you do.

These five "practices" (not "laws" or "principles") are foundational:

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act
5. Encourage the Heart

It's one thing to follow someone because you think you have to "or else," and it's another when you follow a leader because you want to.

Leadership competence is different from technical competence. You don't have to be the most skilled engineer to lead a high-technology company, for instance, but you do need to be able to mobilize the best efforts of your engineers to get extraordinary things done.

These four characteristics of admired leaders:

- 1. Being honest**
- 2. Forward-looking**
- 3. Inspiring,**
- 4. Competent**

Have remained constant over more than thirty years

The relative importance of the most desired qualities has varied somewhat over time, but there has been no change in the fact that these are the four qualities people want most in their leaders.

We wanted to know what followers expected of their leaders. We wanted to know the values, personal traits, or characteristics people looked for and admired in someone they would be willing to follow. Since that time we've surveyed tens of thousands of people around the world asking them to select the qualities that they most wanted in a leader. Year after year the results of our research have been striking in their regularity.

And year after year they do not vary significantly by demographical, organizational, or cultural dimensions. It has become quite clear, as the data in the table below illustrates, that there are a few essential "character tests" someone (you) must pass before others are willing to grant the designation of leader. Characteristics of Admired Leaders Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Characteristic

Characteristic Percentage Selecting

Honest 85

Forward-Looking 70

Inspiring 69

Competent 64

Intelligent 42

Broad-Minded 40

Dependable 37
Supportive 36
Fair-Minded 35
Straightforward 31
Determined 28
Cooperative 26
Ambitious 26
Courageous 21
Caring 20
Loyal 18
Imaginative 18
Mature 16
Self-Controlled 11
Independent 6

Being honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent are the qualities that the majority of your constituents look for in you.

Above all else, people must be able to believe in their leaders. They must believe that your word can be trusted, that you are personally passionate and enthusiastic about the work that you're doing, and that you have the necessary knowledge and skill to lead.

As a leader, you are expected to have a point of view about the future. You are expected to articulate exciting possibilities about how today's work will result in tomorrow's world.

If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message.

Credibility, as Arthur points out, doesn't come from giving orders; it comes from aligning your actions and your words.

It's The Kouzes-Posner Second Law of Leadership: DWYSYWD, or Do What You Say You Will Do.

The consistent living out of values is a behavioral way of demonstrating honesty and trustworthiness.

“People won’t follow you, or even pay much attention to you, if you don’t have any strong beliefs.”

English-born poet and organizational consultant David Whyte has written that the “voice throws us back on what we want for our life. It forces us to ask ourselves Who is speaking? Who came to work today? Who is working for what? What do I really care about?”

What do you really care about? Is it success, wealth, family, freedom, growth, love, power, spirituality, trust, wisdom, health, honesty? None of these? All of these? Other values?

Communicate and paint a vision that everyone in the proper context can recognize as his or her own vision.

What you espouse, as Carlo points out, must resonate with the aspirations of others.

Conformity produces compliance, not commitment.

Credible leaders listen, not just to their own aspirations, but also to the needs and desires of others. Leadership is a relationship, and relationships are built on mutual understanding.

The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is the defining competence of leaders. Leaders are custodians of the future.

And how does a new leader develop the capacity to be forward-looking? The answer is deceptively simple: spend more time in the future. You have to carve out more time each week to peering into the distance and imagining what might be out there.

Michael Hyatt, CEO of the publishing company Thomas Nelson, writes in his blog about why it’s so important for leaders to spend the time to create a compelling vision of the future: “Vision is the lifeblood of any organization. It is what keeps it moving forward. It provides meaning to the day-to-day challenges and setbacks that make up the rumble and tumble of real life. Michael then goes on to talk about how in tough economic times things get very tactical and focused on survival and how decisions become very pragmatic.”

After a while this short-term approach grinds us down. People lose sight of the bigger picture. Michael points out that: This is where great leadership makes all the difference. Leadership is more than influence. It is about reminding people of what it is we are trying to build—and why it matters. It is about painting a picture of a better future. It comes down to pointing the way and saying, “C’mon. We can do this!”

It is your job as a leader to being forward-looking is the differentiating leadership credibility factor, you need to spend more time reading about, thinking about, and talking about the long-term view. Make it your business to spend time studying the future.

Optimists have a sixth sense for possibilities that realists can't or won't see.

Leadership is a team sport.

Serious weaknesses in the domain of emotional intelligence predict failure at senior levels with amazing accuracy.

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.

A significant part of the leader's job is uncovering and reflecting back the meaning that others seek. 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 very best leaders understand that it's about inspiring a shared vision, not about selling their own idiosyncratic views of the world.

When people describe their relationships with their most admired leader, they tell us they feel empowered, listened to, understood, capable, important, like they mattered, challenged to do more, and other similar descriptors. 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 relationships than they would be otherwise. Think about how important it is to know that your manager believes in your, supports you and will back you up.

It is truly important to believe that your direct reports can be better, and that, as a leader, you need to convince them of their potential. 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.

TRUST

In a 2009 international study, the majority of people said they trust a stranger more than they trust their boss. High-trust organizations have been shown to outperform low-trust organizations by 286% in total return to shareholders. I understood that in order for my employees, and thus myself, to be successful, I needed to develop a cohesive and collaborative team. Trust rules your personal credibility. Trust rules your ability to get things done. Trust rules your team's cohesiveness. Trust rules your organization's innovativeness and performance. Trust rules your brand image. Trust rules just about everything.

Trust motivates people to go beyond mere compliance with authority. It motivates them to reach for the best in themselves, their team, and their organization. There's a very powerful message here, and all leaders need to pay attention to it.

People won't take risks unless they feel safe. They need to feel secure that they will not be unfairly treated, embarrassed, harassed, harmed, or hurt when taking action.

How can we facilitate trust?

- **Behave predictably and consistently**
Some degree of successful predictability is required in order for people to believe and trust in you
- **Communicate clearly**
When you are clear about what you mean, then there is less chance that others will find your statements misleading
- **Treat promises seriously**
Further complications occur when people can't distinguish between wishes or vague promises on your part and those to which you've seriously committed
- **Be forthright and candid**
Still greater disclosure between people generally makes for better working relationships and easier resolution of problems should they arise. Mark Twain once said, "if you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything."

Michael Hackman describes the need to replace the traditional "need to know" mentality of communications with a "need to share" approach. A need to know approach tightly controls information while a "need to share" mentality fosters information exchange that is important for trust.

When information is not forthcoming, is late or is perceived to have been withheld, distrust begins to build. Waiting to disseminate information is often justified as a desire to gather more certain and complete information, but waiting often contributes to distrust. When it comes to sustaining trust over the long term, you have to communicate, communicate and communicate.

Openness is one of the major drivers of trust, and sharing information is one of the major ways that you express your openness with others and signal your trust in them. Leaders are far better served when they're forthcoming with information. There's nothing more destructive to trust than deceit, and nothing more constructive than candor.

"What we have before us are breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems"-John Gardner.

By definition, leaders take charge of change.

Angela Duckworth, professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and her colleagues define **grit** very simply as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" and working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity and plateaus in progress.

The truth is that you either lead by example or you don't lead at all. Alan Deutschman in *Walk the Talk* says, "Leaders have only two tools at their disposal: What they say and how they act. What they say might be interesting, but how they act is always crucial." Quite often the greatest distance that leaders have to travel is the distance from their mouths to their feet.

Nothing undermines or erodes your credible and your effectiveness as a role model faster than not being willing to acknowledge and take responsibility when you've made a mistake. Admitting you're wrong or that you don't know are some of the best signs that a leader can be believed. It's your job as a leader to keep asking others, "How am I doing?" If you don't ask, they're not likely to tell you. At the end of the day, can you say to yourself that you acted in concert with your values?

Bob Eichinger, Mike Lombardo, and Dave Ulrich report that in their studies the single best predictor of future success in new and different managerial jobs is *learning agility*, which they define as "the ability to reflect on experience and then engage in new behaviors based on those reflections." It is not only what you know, but how you learn that will set you apart. There is no shortcut to greatness in leadership or anything else.

Those who are the very best became that way because they spent more time learning and practicing, not less time learning. One of the biggest problems with training and development these days is that after a couple of weekend sessions, people move on to something new, or maybe nothing at all. There is little or no sustained effort to perfect a skill. Research shows that coaching is number two on the list of the most effective strategies for accelerating the development of high potentials. Just as leaders can't lead alone, they can't learn alone either.

"The purpose of leadership is to create a legacy and not a legend" Gary Strack.

When you affirm someone, it isn't the size of the gesture that is important, but the simple fact that you noticed someone's contributions.

"When it comes to choosing a life path, you should do what you love—because if you don't love it, you are unlikely to work hard enough to get very good at it." Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D Levitt authors of *Freakonomics*.

Being passionate enables a person to be a great leader. You will learn from experience that you are at your best when you are passionate and care deeply about what you are doing.