

Leadership in the Next Decade

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Let's imagine that after years of disciplined study, hard work, learning from mistakes and persevering, you've done it – you've landed your dream job. The timing is perfect. There's intense interest just now in your company's or business unit's work. You've got a big budget and a great team. You're thrilled. You're terrified.

So you head to your local bookstore or start searching the web to see what the experts are saying about what makes a leader successful. What you find is an astonishing array of tomes and sites dedicated to the subject. They promise everything from inspiring stories of iconic CEOs who single-handedly turned around failing corporations to the change management wisdom of a fictional mouse. After an hour of browsing through diverse views on the four essential leadership practices, the management model that will make everything fall into place, the ten steps to success, your head is spinning. People have done a lot of thinking about leadership – what to make of it all?

What have I learned from my many years of tracking the literature, advising and developing executives and executive teams, and taking on tough leadership roles myself?

The first thing I'll say is that anyone who truly believes there is a simple recipe for leadership success has not spent much time in a leadership role or watching leaders go about their work. They've not had to figure out how to improve service while cutting costs. They haven't thought about how to keep people energized and positive while giving them tough feedback on their performance. Or telling them some of their colleagues are losing their jobs. They haven't tried to satisfy multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests while staying true to their personal vision of what's right. They haven't experienced the instant shifts from delving into the details of why the budget isn't balancing, to planning long-term strategy, to delivering a motivational speech to employees, to being grilled at a press conference or by the Board.

I've read a lot of books and heard many speeches on leadership in the course of my career, and from most I've gleaned at least a few nuggets of insight. The best have provided me useful new ways of thinking about challenges I've faced in my role or with my clients. I think the key is to mentally connect what you take away from what you read or hear with an "and" rather than an "or." If you track the literature over time, you'll see the pendulum swings. Someone comes out with a theory that resonates; others are quick to pick up the theme. Warren Bennis, for example, began in

the mid-1980s to explore what distinguishes “leaders” from “managers.” His books were highly influential and continue to provide insight to a new generation of leaders. It was Bennis who wrote: “Managers are people who do things right; leaders are people who do the right thing.” You’ll hear echoes of his thinking throughout much of the literature of the past several decades: The manager administers; the leader innovates. The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective. The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why. The manager has his eye on the bottom line; the leader has his eye on the horizon. The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.

More recently, Henry Mintzberg has argued that the fashion of seeking to distinguish leaders from managers has in reality led to us being “overled and undermanaged.” This is because it’s “easier to muse about the glories of leadership than it is to come to grips with the realities of management.” It may be possible to distinguish leadership and management conceptually, but rarely in practice: “Leadership cannot simply delegate management...we should be seeing managers *as* leaders, and leadership as management practiced well.”

By putting leadership on a pedestal, we’re shining the spotlight on individual leaders rather than on the community of people who must collaborate to make any organization successful. We’ve created a breeding ground for what the ancient Greeks called “hubris” – the overblown sense of self-importance and entitlement that can drive leaders to lose touch with reality and destroy their organizations. We’ve seen that happen too often in recent years.

Note that in Mintzberg’s thinking, the “and” has replaced the “or”: the best leaders are great leaders and great managers. I would argue that the same principle should be applied to many of the big questions that have preoccupied students of leadership. Are the most effective leaders visionaries or good at managing tactical detail? Are they strategic thinkers or excellent at execution? Are they people-oriented or numbers-driven?

I would say, yes and yes. In my experience the strongest leaders are those who can instantly size up what’s required by a situation and adjust their style appropriately. They are multi-faceted and multi-skilled. At the right moment, they engage their teams in exploring the big picture and charting a clear path forward. When they see their teams struggling to execute a critical task along the way, they can roll up their sleeves, identify blockages and figure out how to make progress. When an employee is clearly stressed, they take the time to find out the root cause, coach and support. When someone consistently fails to deliver, they hold him or her accountable and there are consequences – no excuses or turning a blind eye.

This is not to say that to be a leader you have to be highly skilled in every aspect of what leaders are called on to do. Were that the case, true leaders would be few and far between. I don't believe in the myth of the heroic leader – the one individual who knows it all and can do it all. The best leaders I've seen have both the self-awareness to identify where they are strong and the self-confidence to surround themselves with people who are more competent than they are in areas where they're weak. In other words, they have the kind of “emotional intelligence” that Daniel Goleman and others have identified as a key characteristic of successful leaders.

They are strict about carving out sufficient time and space for introspection – to be honest with themselves about what's working and what's not. They have the courage to seek feedback from others, to hear it with an open mind, and to welcome guidance from trusted advisors. They have the emotional intelligence to understand the impact they're having on others and others are having on them. They manage conflict and contention toward constructive ends rather than shying away. While I don't present these as “the three keys,” I do want to underscore three talents that I think are taking on more importance as we better understand the complexity of dealing with challenges in an increasingly interdependent world.

The first is the ability to build effective teams and optimize their performance. Recognizing that you need people with complementary skills and different knowledge around you is a great first step. Then you need to select the right people for these roles (sternly resisting the natural temptation to hire in your own image) and invest in helping them function effectively together. If you're extraordinarily lucky, the top-notch individuals with the highly diverse skills and perspectives you need to collaborate on a task will simply gel and get on with the job. More often than not, it will take time and effort for you and the team to build a shared language and common vision of where you're collectively heading, understand what unique skill each individual brings, uncover the differences in how people think and approach work, surface and align assumptions. Once again, this takes some emotional intelligence on the part of the leader (and all team members) and a great deal of patience.

The second is what Roger Martin in his recent book *The Opposable Mind* calls “integrative thinking.” Taking his inspiration from novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald's observation that “the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function” is the sign of a first-rate intelligence, Martin makes the case that this is in fact the starting point for innovation and competitive advantage. He describes how Isadore Sharp, faced with the choice of continuing to build small motels offering intimacy and personal service or large hotels with all the amenities but lacking personal touch – the two dominant models in the industry at the time – used his “opposable mind” to create a new model offering the best of both worlds. The Four Seasons Hotel and Resort brand is today recognized and admired around the globe.

Likewise, when A.G. Lafley became CEO of floundering Procter & Gamble, he was lobbied by two factions with opposing views of the route to success: drastic cost cutting to keep prices competitive or innovation to differentiate P&G with products for which consumers would pay premium prices. He chose both. As Lafley himself puts it: “We weren’t going to win if it was an ‘or.’ Everybody can do ‘or’... You’re not going to win if you are in a trade-off game.”

Note once again the power of the “and.” Faced with complexity, management practice has tended to focus on simplifying by eliminating options, breaking the problem into manageable pieces and putting specialized teams to work at them. The problem with eliminating options out of hand is that you’re probably doing so based on the patterns of thinking and acting that got you into trouble in the first place. The problem with sending people off to find a solution to a bit of the problem is that the various “bit” solutions may not work well together – or even create greater problems – in the context of the larger system.

It was Peter Senge who in 1990 popularized the idea of “systems thinking,” which he called “the art of seeing the forest *and* the trees.” This is the ability to discern patterns in what could look like chaos, to distinguish root causes from symptoms, to find a plot-line – organizing complexity into a coherent story.

That brings me to the third leadership talent I want to highlight. The primary work of a leader is to communicate. This may fall into the too-obvious-for-words category, but I find that it surprises many people to hear it put that way. Every leader has a degree of accountability to a great variety of stakeholders, whether these be owners, board members voters, bosses, employees, colleagues, customers, governments, communities. A leader’s success depends on a constant flow of reliable information to and from and among all these groups. The information may begin as “data,” but the leader also has a role to play in giving it “meaning”: information that keeps people pulling in the same direction and motivated to get there; information they can put to use to solve problems and seize opportunities; information that creates trust and good-will.

I encourage you to consider these perspectives on leadership as simply a starting point for your own exploration of what kind of leader it takes to do such jobs well.

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