



More than a TITLE

Reflections on Leadership

by Ellen Bryson

IN A RECENT CONVERSATION with a particular CEO, the evidence I found that he was a leader was the title on his business card. His company could be twice its current size, but its growth has stagnated in both revenues and profits. He is extremely frustrated with this, and he knows what is holding them back: a lack of trust throughout the organization.

Unfortunately, he fails to recognize that he is the source of this problem. He feels entitled to respect because of his rank in the company. He has little interest in developing himself because he thinks he already possesses the skills and knowledge needed for success by virtue of the fact that he is the CEO. He eschews spending on staff development, believing they just need to work harder. He seems to have no vision for the company and sets no goals to be achieved. He comes to the office when he feels like it, yet he expects his employees to work ten to fifteen hours of overtime each week in gratitude for their “great” salaries and benefits. In short, he rules with an iron fist and expects his employees to do as he says, not as he does. Ever met anyone like this?

This man has fallen victim to Patrick Lencioni’s *Five Temptations of a CEO*. He rewards people who contribute to his ego rather than to the results of the company. He would rather have no goals than set goals that might not be achieved. He is concerned with preserving his comfortable lifestyle and status in the community rather than creating value for his stockholders. These temptations, left unchecked, will ultimately be this CEO’s demise.

Organizational “leaders” who fit this description don’t just fail to motivate and build trust in their people; they actually tear them down, and their organizations follow. Real leaders exist at all levels of an organization, and the attributes that identify them are unmistakable.

What does real leadership look like?

Leaders **listen**. More times than not, they don't have the answers, but they find them by asking lots of questions and weighing the responses. This can't be done in isolation; it requires that they surround themselves with people smarter than they are who are willing to challenge the status quo. In short, they are willing to be vulnerable for the good of the organization.

Lencioni identifies the "desire for invulnerability" as the fifth temptation a CEO must avoid. When direct reports do not feel safe expressing opinions counter to those of the CEO, they will rally around the inferred opinion of the leader and only challenge one another when it is politically expedient. In this environment, important issues never surface and hard decisions are not made because harmony trumps effectiveness as a goal.

CEOs must tolerate – even encourage – discord. Only after they have *listened* to all possible solutions can sound decisions be made.

Leaders **empower** their subordinates. Peter Drucker said, "Leadership is not about money, fame and power; it is about empowering others to lead." Leaders know that true greatness outlasts them, and it is achieved by moving people in the direction of a goal. Therefore, leaders expect great things from themselves and others, so they live their values and mentor their followers to higher levels of performance. A true leader finds his greatest satisfaction in the development of his people. He seeks their success, not their affection, and thus holds them accountable for what he expects of them.

Leaders **align** their organizations. They seek clarity around their mission, going to great lengths to ensure that all employees understand and embrace the mission. They set priorities and hold everyone accountable for achieving shared goals. They help each employee understand how his efforts directly contribute to the company's goals.

Their decisions may not always be accurate, but they are always clear. Decisive action often cannot wait for conclusive information, but with everyone committed to the action, the organization can appropriately and quickly respond to the consequences, good or bad.

Leaders **develop** people. They know that the right people doing the right things are their greatest assets, and when properly trained and motivated, provide a unique competitive advantage. Leaders always seek improvement for themselves and their employees, and they create an environment to enable and encourage this. Fundamental to this environment is empathy for the needed balance in peoples' professional and personal lives.

Leaders **engage** with others as an active team member. They don't just manage from the sidelines, but are intimately involved with the matters at hand. They don't micromanage, however, but trust their employees to adequately fill their given roles. One cannot lead by example without being part of the team.

Leaders **reach** for the stars. They purposely push outside their comfort zone to mine change and lead transformation. They believe their work is significant, so they passionately stretch beyond perceived limits to achieve their greatest potential. Most importantly, they connect with people in a way that inspires them to do the same.

Leaders **serve**. In *Servant Leadership*, former AT&T executive Robert Greenleaf calls service to others a leader's primary purpose. Greenleaf claims that if people feel you are genuinely interested in serving others, they will not only follow you; they will dedicate their efforts to the common cause. The leader who serves his employees will find his employees eager to serve their customers.

Bill George talks about 21st Century leadership in *Authentic Leadership*. "We need authentic leaders to run our organizations," he writes, "leaders committed to stewardship of their assets and to making a difference in the lives of the people they serve".

Leaders' dedication to service reaches beyond their office walls. Think of leaders you know, and you will likely find them engaged in volunteerism of some sort. I was recently privileged to hear a young woman named Catherine Rohr talk about a prison entrepreneurship program she started. "It's not about us, it's about others," she said.

That's leadership.



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Develop *people*

Engage *with others*

Reach *for the stars*

Serve