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Patrick Lencioni's Point of View

Humble Leaders *and* Organizational Humility


Maui Surf (Ilivia Yudkin)

PERHAPS ONE OF THE BIGGEST misconceptions that people have of great leaders is that they are the recipients of only wonderful benefits - fame, fortune, perks, attention - as a result of holding their position of power or influence. Often we focus on the accolades that leaders receive at the end of their career, in many cases even after they have died. The truth is, being a leader, at least a great one, is a largely sacrificial endeavor, one with far greater costs than benefits.

Part of the reason this misconception exists is that leaders are not encouraged, or even allowed, to acknowledge their pain and suffering. After all, in many organizations leaders earn a lot more money than the people they lead, and any discussion of their pain would elicit little sympathy.

This is fine, because sympathy is not what leaders need most. What they do need is an understanding that all great leaders suffer, and that important accomplishments cannot be

achieved without suffering. This has been true throughout history. What kind of suffering am I referring to?

Loneliness, rejection, unpopularity, blame and criticism. And while it is true that no one gets through life without experiencing all of these realities from time to time, great leaders put themselves in a position to get far more than their fair share, and with greater intensity.

Great leaders are often *lonely* because they do not give in to the temptation to vent their problems with others in the organization, deciding instead to carry those issues themselves. They experience *unpopularity* and *rejection* by making the difficult decisions that can temporarily alienate the people they lead. They invite *blame* and *criticism* by accepting responsibility for every failure in the organization while giving away credit for most successes.

In short, great leaders make the mission of the organization more important than their personal needs. It's called humility, and it's not just something great leaders choose to do; it's who they are and what makes them great leaders in the first place.

THE GREATEST LEADER? YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF HIM.

I have been asked on a number of occasions, by journalists and curious clients, whom I believe to be the greatest leader in America. And I usually respond with my own question. "Are you asking for the name of a famous leader?" This usually leads to a fair amount of confusion, until I explain that the best leader in the world is probably relatively obscure.

You see, I believe that the best leader out there is probably running a small or medium-sized company in a small or medium-sized town. Or maybe they're running an elementary school or a church. Moreover, that leader's obscurity is not a function of mediocrity, but rather a disdain for unnecessary attention and adulation. He or she would certainly prefer to have a stable home life, motivated employees, and happy customers—in that order—over public recognition.

A skeptic might well respond, "But if this person really were the greatest leader, wouldn't his or her company eventually grow in size and stature, and become known for being great?" And the answer to that fine question would be, "Not necessarily."

A great company should achieve its potential and grow to the size and scale that suits its founders' and owners' and employees' desires, not to mention the potential of its market. It may very well wildly exceed customer expectations and earn a healthy profit by doing so, but not necessarily grow for the sake of growing.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where bigger is often equated with better and where fame and infamy are all too often considered to be one and the same. And so we mistakenly come to believe that if we haven't seen a person's picture on the cover of *BusinessWeek* or in a dot-matrixed image in *The Wall Street Journal*, then they can't possibly be the best.

Consider for a moment those high profile leaders we do read about in the newspaper and see on television. Most, but not all, of them share an overwhelming desire and need for attention. You'll find them in all kinds of industries, but most prevalently in politics, media, and big business. Look hard enough at them, and there is a decent chance you'll discover people who have long aspired to be known as great leaders. These are the same people who also value public recognition over real impact. And based on my experience, you might also find that they'll be more highly regarded by strangers and mere acquaintances than by the people who work and live with them most closely.

The truth is, our greatest leaders usually don't aspire to positions of great fame or public awareness. They choose instead to lead in places where they can make a tangible, meaningful difference in the lives of the people they are called to serve. Not coincidentally, the humility that leads them to choose these places is exactly what makes them successful.

Humble leaders provoke levels of loyalty, commitment and performance that more ego-centric ones can't quite elicit or understand. Most importantly, their influence extends far beyond the executive team and defines the personality of their organizations. When combined with a clear sense of purpose and drive, humility can propel a seemingly ordinary company to achieve uncommon results, usually by creating an environment of teamwork and willingness to learn from mistakes.

THREE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS WITH HUMILITY

Over the course of the past few years, I've been fortunate to have access to three very different world class organizations that impressed me with their humility and, frankly, surprised me. I was shocked because my observations seemed to contrast what their critics had led me to believe.

Wal-Mart

The first of these organizations is none other than Wal-Mart. Yes, Wal-Mart. Several years ago, I spent a day at their headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. I had no idea what I was in for.

Having heard again and again about how Wal-Mart was dominating and controlling the retail industry and mistreating employees, I was expecting to arrive at a main campus resembling one of the many high tech country clubs I've grown accustomed to seeing in the Silicon Valley. What I found in Bentonville was a collection of buildings that were neither uniform nor impressive, many of which seemed to be converted warehouses and strip-mall quality structures from the 1970s. I loved it! And there was no separate executive suite with a different set of standards.

These titans of industry were working in facilities that were no more comfortable or grand than those of the people who worked in their stores around the world. And inside those buildings, the stories were no different. Neat and clean, but more like a DMV than a palace. And the cafeteria where I had lunch reminded me of my junior high school.

But the humility at Wal-Mart went far beyond the physical environment. The people there were uniformly friendly, gracious and unpretentious. But don't misunderstand. They

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were also very bright and had levels of experience, education and knowledge rivaling any other corporation I had seen. But you would never know it by the way they treated one another. And everyone, from senior executives to the people running the cash registers in the cafeteria, were treated with the same levels of respect and kindness, all of which seemed to create an environment of genuine enthusiasm and commitment among employees.

As for their reaction to the barrage of criticism leveled at them by competitors and the media, they were neither bitter nor angry. Instead, they seemed genuinely open to finding any truth in the accusations so they could address them, and then determined to calmly set the record straight in the many areas where they were being unfairly accused.

United States Military Academy at West Point

The second organization that impressed me with its humility is the United States Military Academy at West Point. I had a chance to visit the campus for two days with my father, and we were each overwhelmed by what we experienced.

From the general who ran the school itself and the officers and professors who taught the courses to the cadets and enlisted men who worked security at the front gate, humility was the dominant and undeniable trait shared by all. And this went far beyond the *yessirs* and *nosirs* that one would expect to find at a military institution.

Here were some of the very best and brightest young people in the nation, with outstanding academic, extracurricular and athletic backgrounds, and you would have thought that none of them had seen their own resumes.

And like Wal-Mart, people of every rank and age and gender were treated with uniform levels of respect and kindness. My father, who had served as an enlisted man in the army more than thirty years ago, was treated by three star generals as though he were their military peer.

So many people, who have never known a West Point cadet or visited the campus, assume that arrogance and macho must rule the day there. Nothing could be further from the truth. While there is certainly no lack of courage and character among the men and women who attend and run the institution, none of them seems to have a need to prove that to anyone other than to themselves. God bless them for what they're doing.

De La Salle High School Football

The final organization I want to cite for its humility is a high school football team. Actually, it's not a team so much as it is a school and a sports program. I live near De La Salle High School, an all-male Christian Brothers institution that has become known for having the best high school football team in the history of the sport, or for that matter, any sport. Over the course of fifteen years, the team won 151 consecutive games and traveled extensively to play the best teams they could find.

I had heard many stories about the De La Salle football factory over the years, and the allegations of recruiting great players from faraway places to stack the deck in their favor. All of which led to my astonishment at what I would find when I attended a few of their games and came to know something about their coach and program, in general.

First, walking into their "stadium" is both a let-down and a breath of fresh air. The facility itself is tiny. Tiny. After more than twenty years of unparalleled success, most schools would have been tempted to construct a monument to football. Not De La Salle. You can drive by the school and pass the field and mistake it for a junior high school.

On top of that, there is no mention anywhere of the exploits of the football team. No championship signs. No shrine to their coaches or players. Nothing. The only meaningful tribute I've ever seen there was a painting of a player who was tragically murdered. And that's the thing about De La Salle. It's not about football, or championships, or fame. It's about the way people treat people.

I had a chance to hear the team's head coach speak at an event, and I can honestly say that I've never been moved so much by a talk. Coach Ladouceur was not stylishly dressed and was, by no means, a particularly eloquent or fiery or demonstrative speaker. Keep in mind that this is a guy who has been profiled on ESPN and in *Sports Illustrated*, and has had many of the nation's finest coaches at every level seek his advice. I would have expected even a bad high school football coach to be a little brash. But Ladouceur oozed humility.

Every statement he made had meaning, and almost none of it was about him. He talked about the fact that he considers himself a religion teacher and character mentor first and foremost, and that he does not and never will actively recruit kids to come to his school. He said he admires his players for having skills and talents and potential that he could only dream of. And there was no doubt in my mind that he meant every word he said.

SHORT-TERM PAIN; LONG-TERM REWARDS

What did I learn from Wal-Mart, West Point and De La Salle? That humility is powerful, but cannot be attained out of desire for power. It is its own aim, and its own reward. I also learned that one of the costs of being humbly successful is that others will throw stones at you, and that humility requires that you throw none back. This takes a very real toll on any human being. It leads to restless nights of sleep, strain on their families

and questions about self-worth that go above and beyond the regular doses of these maladies that non-leaders experience.

Now, when people assume positions of leadership without expecting all of this, they set themselves up for substantial disillusionment and disappointment. And once that disappointment kicks in, they often find themselves tempted to compensate themselves through excessive financial or ego-related rewards.

In fact, this failure to understand the inherently sacrificial nature of leadership may well lie at the heart of the scandals that have made their way onto the front pages of our newspapers. Disappointed with the relatively unsatisfying personal economics of their jobs, CEOs look for love in all the wrong places. Fame. Fortune. Perks. Attention.

Truly great leaders overcome these temptations. They know that the only real, lasting reward for being a leader is the accomplishment of goals that result in the betterment of others. Even when that involves suffering.

So, whether you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, the head of a department within that company, an entrepreneurial leader of a small business, the principal of an elementary school or the minister of a church, remember that suffering is part of your job. And the next time you're in the midst of it, know that you're probably doing something important.

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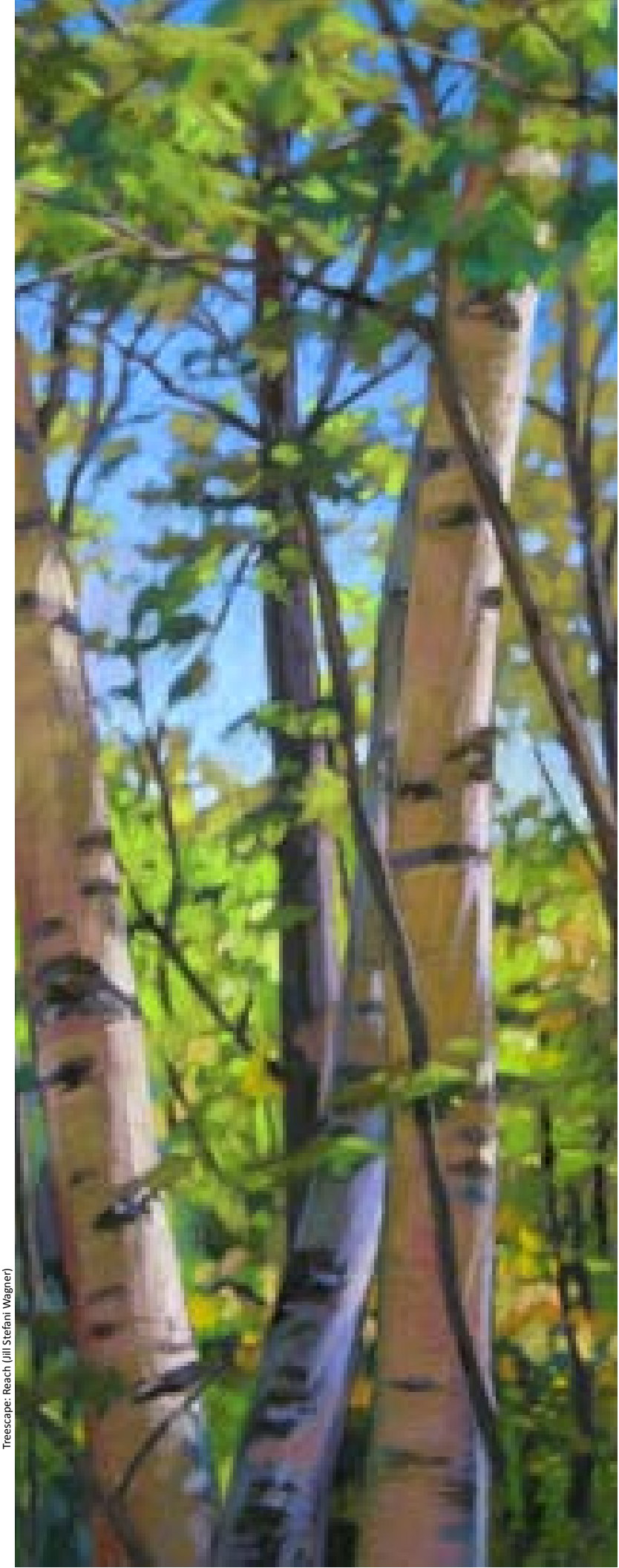

Treescape: Reach (Jill Stefani Wagner)