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Leadership

From the Editor

Not too long ago I came across this observation: Things are impossible until they are not. It was credited to an individual named Jean-Luc Picard. It started me thinking about how do we know whether something is impossible. Is something impossible because we haven't seen it? Is it impossible because we can't imagine it? Or is something impossible because we haven't done it ... yet?

Leaders within organizations have an ability to reach through a wall and pull what seems impossible to the other side. They have a belief that what seems impossible today doesn't have to be so forever. They find ways to break the barriers of limited imagination, limited resources, limited thinking.

Part of what we do is help individuals, teams, and organizations make the impossible possible. Not with magic; not with mere hoping; but by building knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These three, when combined with a belief that the impossible is possible, ensure that individuals and organizations achieve what is important to them.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Are leaders made or are they born? Who knows what part of behaviour is a function of nature and what is a function of nurture?

Stephen Baetz, the author of this article, avoids the intricacies of that debate. He does assert, however, that what is admired in leaders is anti-instinctual or anti-intuitive. As he points out, "... a lot of what I admired in leaders was their ability not to do what comes naturally, even easily."

He maps out eight actions leaders take that capture the imagination and attention of the people they lead.

Stephen is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization that sponsor this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Curbing Instincts

You can hear something a thousand-and-one times and it never seems to register. Then, for whatever reason, you hear the same idea and it comes at you like a smiling stranger — familiar and yet not. That happened to me not too long ago.

In the space of about ten days, the same idea came coming at me — dressed in slightly different attire — but the same nonetheless:

“He’s a natural.”

“She’s got the knack; it must be in the genes.”

“You can’t learn that stuff.”

“Some people have it but most don’t.”

“Now that’s got to be second nature.”

I’m used to hearing that about athletes but, in these cases, the reference was to managers. For a moment it stirred up the old nature-nurture debate within me as I wondered about whether there was some leadership gene that gave the lucky recipients the right stuff. When I thought about when and where the observations were made, it struck me that most of the observers were commenting on the ability of the leader to be doing the right thing at the right time.

In fact, most of what was being admired was anti-instinctual or anti-intuitive. And, for whatever reason, it appeared to be the right thing for them to be doing as a leader. This got me thinking that a lot of what I admired in leaders was their ability not to do what comes naturally, even easily. As a result of this reflection, I’ve developed a list of what I believe exceptional leaders do that draws the attention and admiration of others.

They Plan When They’re Feeling Overwhelmed.

Facing a mountain of tasks and To Do’s, many people do something, anything, to reduce the size of it. And often they end up doing it over because their quick fix failed.

Leaders feel the pressure to get on with it, but they take time to plan. They look at what is in front of them and define what is important and what is merely urgent; they identify the highest leverage items; they

anticipate what impact their action — or inaction — will have on others; they focus on the goal. They resist the temptation to do something, anything, just to feel better.

Don’t mistake investing some time in planning with stalling or paralysis. The most effective never allow the size of the mountain to cause them to be so overwhelmed they can’t move forward. They take high-leverage, thoughtful action.

They Develop Others When Feeling Pressured To Get It Done.

The remarkable leaders know that developing the skills, knowledge, and capacity of individuals and teams is as important a responsibility for the long-term future of the organization as getting the job done now is for the short-term. That isn’t easy to do. When pressured to deliver in the short-term, the instinctual response is to leave development to another time “when it’s less hectic.” The reality is that most enterprises don’t have such a time.

The best leaders — those who appear to be the naturals — find time in the midst of it all to coach, to look for opportunities for learning, to mentor, and to encourage. They use the heat of the moment to improve the quality and flexibility of the people they lead.

They Listen When They Are Being Attacked.

When facing verbal attacks, the outstanding leaders resist the easy temptation to push back, defend, justify, argue, or prove to the other person that they are wrong.

Instead, they take on a listening posture: looking for the needs that are hidden by positions, searching for the motivations behind the argument, finding the necessities that are obscured by the anxieties. All the time, they remain calm — that’s calm, not distant or aloof. Sure enough, they are passionate about the issues and they compete vigorously against problems. However, they never attack individuals or teams; they refuse to return fire; they avoid taking it personally.

They Focus When The Opportunities Are Numerous.

Faced with a myriad of opportunities, the instinctual thing, it seems to me, is to grab them all. The outstanding leaders I know focus. Instead of going after many, they select the few that they know are the most important. They avoid the temptation to do it all.

They don't wait for a crisis to tell them that they have to focus the business, they do it when they are opportunity-rich.

They Delegate When They Are Held Accountable.

Think about how unnatural delegation is! You who knows how to do the job, gives it to someone else who may be less skilled and then you stand back and watch them do it less well while you're held accountable. The natural instinct is to do it yourself if you're the one who is going to be accountable.

The incredible leaders delegate and stay accountable. Of course, they are wise enough to know that they ought to develop the skills of those to whom they delegate.

If, by some chance, failure does occur, they never blame, finger point, or allow others to take a shot at the individual. In a counter-intuitive move, they buffer the individual from organizational criticism so learning in the future isn't discouraged.

They Make Balanced Decisions.

The marketplace in which all organizations function is both complex and dynamic. Decisions must be balanced to meet the needs of sometimes competing stakeholders — from owners to employees, from customers to suppliers. Just at the point you think you understand the needs of each, they reform themselves into a new reality.

The easiest thing to do is to serve a single interest group — perhaps the one with the greatest capacity to reward. As a result, the interest of shareholders often dominates.

By contrast, the remarkable leader makes balanced decisions that serve the needs of several stakeholders.

They refuse to make the challenges seem simple when they're not. Nor do they allow the simple to become overly complex. They are realists.

They Expect A Lot.

Excuse-ing is easy; some might even argue, natural — it's our way to protect our self-image. After all, there are always numerous reasons why a deadline is impossible, why a quality standard is too high, why doing it right first time is impossible, why a process can't be followed, why cost guidelines are too stringent, or why efficiencies can't be gained.

The remarkable leaders resist using easy excuses. They expect a lot of themselves and of others who work with them. They set high standards that cause everyone to stretch. By doing so, they oblige everyone — including themselves — to learn.

This doesn't imply that they expect people to be perfect. Far from it. They only expect people to learn and make the changes that will help them do better the next time. In such a climate, excuses seem unnecessary.

They Support Others Even If They Aren't Being Supported Themselves.

One of the most incredible leaders I know is an individual who supports, encourages, and cheers her team on ... even though she doesn't get the same treatment from her immediate manager.

Supporting and encouraging are easy to do if you've been supported; infinitely more difficult to do, however, if the behaviour isn't modelled. This leader gives what she doesn't get. She generously shares her appreciation for what somebody else had contributed; she thanks them; she raves to others about what growth has been achieved. She believes that this is the right thing to do and she does it without a moment's hesitation.

Let's Stop Training And Let's Start Educating

Ever wonder why senior management views trainers as mechanics and the classroom as the service department where you send people to be fixed?

Senior executives didn't get that impression on their own.

Somehow or other that impression is there because our profession has helped to create it. Training has been used all too often as a quick fix. "Not performing? Let's send them on this training program, give them some basic skills, and see if it makes a difference."

It won't.

We owe it to our organizations to provide people with an education and get out of the quick fix business. Education improves the quality of the organization's intellectual capital by not only building skills but also by building knowledge and the supporting attitudes. Education is a longer-term developmental process which helps people understand context and constraint. Education focuses as much on how to think as what to do. Besides, if the truth were told, most immediate performance problems are best addressed by the immediate manager on a one-to-one basis with specific coaching, support, and follow-up — not by mere classroom input and practice.

If our business is education, then a long-term development process should be what we offer and promise. To do that, we should

- be thoughtful about what attitudes, skills, and knowledge we help managers to learn,
- develop a variety of learning experiences — inside and outside the classroom — that complement one another,
- measure what contribution we are making to learning, and
- refuse to offer quick fixes.

If you would like some help in figuring out how you can best carry out the development work of an educator, please call us.

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.