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## Leadership

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### From the Editor

“I not only use all the brains that I have,” said Woodrow Wilson, “but all that I can borrow.” About seven decades after Wilson offered that glimpse into his leadership style, we were urged by leadership theorists to “engage every mind.”

No matter what the source of the counsel is — a President dealing with the intricacy of governance or an academic encouraging the full utilization of human resources — it’s really good advice.

The reality of today’s complex work environment is that we need a lot of good minds focused on sorting through the issues, determining what is germane, defining action priorities, developing plans, and evaluating results.

Much of what we do at LIVE Consultants is work with organizations to build better teams and to get those teams connected to the complex and challenging issues that are in front of it.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

### About the Author and the Article

There’s a bit a wisdom that suggests that what you think about you bring about. We think about failure, we get failure ... we think about success, we act to get success. The idea is that we align our action with what we believe.

Given that that is true, we ought to, as leaders, select carefully the beliefs that we hold.

In this article, Stephen defines six beliefs that have been embraced by the best leaders he has met and worked with. Some of them are to be expected and some of them are likely to be a surprise.

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



*Stephen Baetz*

# Leadership Beliefs

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It was one of those conversations that started off well enough — pleasantries were exchanged, we brought each other up-to-date on what had happened in our respective worlds since we last talked, the issues that had brought us together in the meeting were defined in a way that was straightforward and understandable.

And then.

I heard a phrase that always makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck: “You know the trouble with ...” At that point, I could see his lips moving but I couldn’t hear a thing he was saying. So it is with trigger words and phrases. They diminish our ability to understand what someone else is thinking and they dump us in some emotional black hole from which rational dialogue is no longer possible. Sometimes we know what the trigger is tied to and sometimes not.

In this case I knew. In the 60s I worked in a drop-in centre for young people who felt disenfranchised from virtually every social institution you can think of — family, schools, teams, work. I would receive volumes of unsolicited comments from those who were neither young nor disenfranchised. “You know the trouble with young people today ... they are afraid of work and they want something for nothing.” They rarely stopped there. “We are developing a whole generation that doesn’t understand that you have to give something for what you get; there are no free lunches; you have to earn everything you get.” The speech was usually delivered with a jabbing finger and a squared jaw.

Discretion was not part of my strong suit then and I would ask, “How do you feel about inheritances?”

They would start sputtering like an old Ford tractor, veins would bulge, one eye would squint, the other eyebrow would rise, and they’d say, “That’s different. Don’t try to change the subject. I’m talking about people getting something for nothing.”

So when I hear those words — you know the trouble with ... — it’s like nails across a blackboard for me because it often signals to me that I’m about to hear strong opinion with

little or no logic. These trigger words and phrases have deep roots.

For reasons that are too long and complicated to explain here, I didn’t stay in social services but ended up working with leaders in the private sector as a management educator. And I wish I had a \$100 for every time I’ve heard, “You know the trouble with ...” My retirement plan would be secured. It happened again last week. This time it went, “You know the trouble with change, it never happens without it costing a lot.”

“Duh,” I thought to myself (the years having taught me to be more circumspect and not say everything I’m thinking at the moment I’m thinking it). “Of course, change costs. People need time to learn new processes, procedures, practices, routines, skills, relationships. You can’t expect to get something for nothing ... there’s no free lunch ... you have to earn everything you get.”

Ouch. I had borrowed the speech I was using ... unsaid, sure ... but the same speech I had been given. Strange how that works.

When it gets right down to it, the reason “You know the trouble with ...” is a trigger for me is because it often is followed with limited logic. In this specific case, I do believe that we ought to expect costs to be associated with benefits and that wishful thinking connected to getting something for nothing ought to be left to when you blow out birthday candles.

However, the experience got me thinking about the best leaders I know in the client base I serve and what some of their fundamental beliefs are. And yes, those leaders do believe that if you want benefits, you have to be willing to pay the costs.

Which got me thinking further about what other beliefs they have that make them, in my estimation, the best leaders. Here’s the list.

## **Leadership Belief: When developing people, start with their strengths.**

Since we spend large chunks of our days solving problems — identifying gaps and finding ways to diminish the distance between what is happening and what we’d like to have

happen — the learned skills that many of us have developed relate to pinpointing deficiencies and shoring them up. Such a tactic, when it comes to developing people, can act to dishearten even the most competent.

The wiser option used by the best leaders is to match the strengths the individual has to the situation and let them do what they do well. At the point it becomes evident that a weakness is getting in the way of success (or the strength has written itself large and becomes a liability) turn yourself to addressing what is getting in the way.

**Leadership Belief: If given a chance, most people will give their best.**

Most leaders would argue that they embrace this belief. The actions of many wouldn't support it, however. I'm impressed with the number of controls and monitoring systems organizations have to protect themselves against employees messing up.

Please don't misunderstand. The best leaders don't abolish controls and assume everything will work out. They do have controls in the most important areas that help them manage risks *and* they get out of the way of people who are highly competent *and* they remove barriers so people can be successful *and* they communicate expectations *and* they share information freely *and* they recognize individuals and teams who have done well and those that are learning. They know when they do all that, most people will give their best.

**Leadership Belief: Tough choices have to be made everyday.**

Few organizations, few teams, few individuals ever have all the resources they need to do everything they want. The less effective leaders dedicate a small amount of resource to many plans, hoping that something works. The best leaders have developed a discipline of identifying the few high-payoff activities and dedicating the organization's resources to those activities. This means that each and every day of the year they are making tough

choices and saying no to those activities and plans which provide little or no advantage.

To do this, leaders must have an ability to be strategic thinkers — reading what is going on in the environment and choosing the critical few strategies and tactics that matter most.

**Leadership Belief: We need to understand the customer more than the competition.**

Leaders that focus solely on the competition develop organizations that are reactive — “let's do what they are doing and make it one better.” The wise leader recognizes that it is better to focus on the needs of the customer; after all, the customer pays the bills.

These leaders require the organization to define what the customer's current needs are, what their emerging needs are, what their customer's customers needs are, and what their customer's customers emerging needs are. Such a definition can engage the minds of everyone in the organization as they figure out the most appropriate way to respond to the customer in both the short-term and the long-term.

**Leadership Belief: Most problems are more complex than they first appear.**

It would be nice to assume that problems are detached and disconnected each from the other. Few are. We work in systems where multiple variables connect and relate to one another in a fluid way to create the outcomes we get. In reality, working in organizations is like holding a balloon filled with water; grab it securely in one place and *for the moment* it feels like you have it ... but then it flops out of control in another place.

Since people on teams like to think of themselves as capable problem solvers, they often describe the problem at the moment it seems to be in hand and under control. At that point, simple responses seem appropriate and possible. The wise leader, by contrast, understands the fluid, complex behaviour of the balloon and recognizes that the problem is more complex than it seems.

# Reading Lists

More and more individuals are taking responsibility for their own learning and development, understanding that this will help to ensure their lifetime employability. To help you in that pursuit, you may want to go to our website — [www.liveconsultants.com](http://www.liveconsultants.com) — and click on *Learning Resources*. That will take you to a section of the site where you will find reading lists in areas like:

- ❖ Change
- ❖ Strategy
- ❖ Employee Engagement
- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Teams
- ❖ Employee Development

We've purposefully chosen what we feel are the best articles and books on the subject.

And who knows, while you're at the site you may find other materials that will help your learning and development.

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

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