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Leadership

From the Editor

As I do every day when I'm in the office, I read the piece of Intellectual Popcorn that appears on our home page. Here's today's. "It is by acts and not by ideas that people live." So said Anatole France, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1921.

It did what it was supposed to do; it got me thinking. There's a part of me that agrees with the observation because, after all, we live in the particular, the observable, the concrete. However (and this is the part where Anatole and I part company) ideas do shape action. Ideas shape beliefs, assumptions, and values. The observation that what we think about, we bring about is true. The Pygmalion Effect offers ample proof of that.

At LIVE Consultants, we not only help people and organizations take the right action, we also help get their thinking and ideas straight first.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Politics and religion, we are told, are topics we should avoid when talking with people we don't know all that well. They have the ability to create uncomfortable moments and interpersonal strain. Want a topic where people have lots to say and talk freely? Ask them about the worst leader they have worked with or observed. You'll open the flood gates.

In this article, Stephen Baetz profiles the characteristics of awful leaders. He does this, not because he doesn't know what else to talk about (as many of you know, he has lots of things he wants to say) but because he thinks it is possible for us to learn from them.

Stephen is a partner at LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Learn from the Awful

April is poetry month. I didn't know that or maybe I did know it but didn't remember it until several poets were being interviewed on the radio to promote the month. This is the first question the interviewer asked: "What is poetry?" I thought I'd be listening to either 15 seconds of dead air or a string of um's, ah's, you-knows, and you-know-what's as the poets gave themselves time to gather a cogent response. I was wrong. As quick as light, one of the interviewees said, "Poetry is to conversation what dance is to walking."

Nice, I thought. Not because of the quickness with which the comparison was offered (although that was impressive in its own right) but nice because the interviewer was clever enough to start with a back-to-square-one question and avoided making any faulty assumptions that we all knew what was being talked about.

After the interview was over, the weather reviewed, and news headlines were offered up like a supermarket sample, I began thinking about the world in which I play. What would my answer be to the back-to-square-one question, "What is leadership?"

"It's what one does," I imagined myself telling the interviewer, "to gain followers." Oh dear that sounds so insufficient. "Leadership is to a team what ideas are to an argument." Metaphors and similes are best left to the poets; things were going downhill rapidly. "Uh, leadership is, you know, ... well, it is, quite frankly, um ... essential."

My next attempt was to describe what a leader does. That was a bit easier: define destinations, make meaning, involve every mind, develop people and teams, create places where others can succeed, learn, help others change, the list goes on.

What I found really easy was to describe awful leadership. I had mental pictures of people and a long list of their shortcomings. To my amazement, when I shared this list, I discovered that my list didn't match the lists that other people offered. What I saw as a weakness, was a strength to someone else. All of this caused me to think about how do we know an awful leader when we see one. I

wanted to know the answer to this before the fact, rather than to discover it after the fact when it might be too late. So here's my description of what creates an awful leader. The list might prompt us to ask better questions as we recruit and select leaders.

Awful leaders place their needs first.

Their economic gain, psychological comfort, or personal preferences are more important than the professional obligations they own. They set a course and make decisions as if the organization or the team were there to serve their needs, rather than the other way around.

The worst part is when these awful leaders pretend that this is not the case and that they are merely giving voice to those who are not at the table: the Board, analysts, shareholders, legal advisors, auditors, to name but a few. Most people, fortunately, can see through the veil and see how ugly it is.

Awful leaders are bullies.

They have terrible interpersonal skills and often use position power or some trumped up urgency as a way to get others to snap-to. These leaders have low emotional intelligence and are surprised when others are upset, not on board, or unwilling.

I suspect that many of these leaders have never learned how to resolve conflict in a constructive way in the schoolyard. As a result, they came to the conclusion that power is the only way; it's a version of might is right. Many have played by the rules on the way up and deferred to the most senior position at the table. So when they become top dog, they figure they have paid their dues and they can have whatever they want, they shouldn't have to ask nicely, and for sure they shouldn't have to listen or be gracious.

Awful leaders blame others.

They dress in Teflon. When failure occurs or outcomes aren't as expected, they are never responsible. Their mantras are predictable:

I wasn't there, I didn't know, nobody ever told me, I'm surprised to hear that. Some scapegoat from deep within the bowels of the organization is often offered up with a "Let this be a lesson to the rest of you" admonition tacked on. Emails then fly around about the importance of candour, open communication, and taking responsibility. The irony is not lost.

Awful leaders are brazen self-promoters.

They tell anyone and everyone who will listen about what they have accomplished and who they know. What they do is far beyond self-confidence, which is what you would expect in a real leader. They curry favour with individuals who might be able to give their career a boost and they avoid spending any time with people who aren't as impressed as they are with their careers. In the worst cases, they undermine anyone who might get in the way of them moving up and on and they never give credit to the accomplishment of others.

Awful leaders have short attention spans.

At a micro level, they hurry others, they interrupt, they implore others to get to the point, they play with their Blackberries when others are talking, they jump from subject to subject like hummingbirds in summer. At a macro level, they move from strategy to strategy, they fall in and out of love with flavour of month programs, they always push others to come up with something new, something fresh. Next month, of course they are on to something else.

Those on this leader's team become frustrated by the endless cycle of make-and-break and soon find that the only practical thing to do is either slow the pace of new ideas or tell the leader that someone has already tried it and it hasn't worked, in the hopes of discouraging more action for the sake of action.

Awful leaders lack integrity.

They say one thing but do something else. They spend lots of time trying to figure out how

something should be spun, and they fail to tell the whole story.

When this couples with a tendency to blame others, the outcomes are not just counterproductive, they are horrible. Victims are sought, rather than problems being solved; truth becomes what the leader says it is, rather than what objective data indicates. In essence, many people find it easier to play a rousing game of Emperor's Clothes.

Awful leaders hide and deny their real agendas.

They aren't forthright about what they really want to accomplish and, when challenged, deny the agenda. But behind the scenes, they are scheming to make the agenda happen. Sure enough worthy leaders think a lot about timing, making sure that what they are offering is the right idea at the right time. And there may be times when they take an initiative off the table. But they are clear about the point of view they hold and the reasons they are not moving forward. By contrast, awful leaders deny the agenda and are deceptive about what they are doing.

Worth Learning

What's the value in profiling awful leaders? One school of thought is that nobody is totally useless, they can always serve as a bad example. And sometimes learning what not to do is as valuable as learning what to do. There is another benefit. The obverse of each observation can be added to our "What Leaders Do" list:

- ✓ Leaders place the needs of the team or the organization first.
- ✓ Leaders are interpersonally skilled.
- ✓ Leaders own their responsibilities.
- ✓ Leaders promote others.
- ✓ Leaders stay focused.
- ✓ Leaders act with integrity.
- ✓ Leaders are transparent.

And now that I've had time to think about it, here's my response to "What is leadership?" — the act of finding ways to make things better.

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