

CHAPTER 1

Do You Know What You Are Doing?

For your sake, let's hope you answered that question with a resounding "sometimes." I hope you are like the rest of us, having to stop on some days and wonder what you were thinking when you said yes to leadership. The fact is, most leaders have times in their lives when they find themselves asking, "Do I know what I'm doing?" It's a normal and expected part of being in a role where you influence people.

You first have to know and accept one major thing that you are doing as a leader . . .

You are messing with people's lives!

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(I'm not sure how much more clearly I can say that.)

The day you said yes to someone, somewhere up in your organization, and decided to join the ranks of leaders, you decided (with complete false confidence) that you had the willingness and ability to tell other people what to do.

Or maybe you didn't. Maybe you were recruited—placed in a leadership class and given three points and a poem on how to lead before you were tossed the keys and wished good luck.

Maybe you entered into a management training program with wide-eyed enthusiasm and a commitment to change the world.

Maybe you decided that you would take a stab at starting your own business. Spreading your entrepreneurial wings, you jumped into the world of business ownership with all of its thrills and risks.

Whatever the case, your decision to say yes to leadership was driven by something—a need to help others, to make more money, to save the world, to boost your self-esteem, to make a difference, or some other reason. Regardless of your reason, your choice resulted in one simple fact: You began *messing with people's lives*. You may not have realized it or wanted it, but that's what happened.

Unfortunately, most leaders do not start with that knowledge. They don't start with a clear and compelling understanding of the real challenges facing them. Their understanding is diluted with operational plans, goal setting, revenue and sales forecasts, cash flow, HR compliance, and the magical bottom line. While all of those are important, they're not the *most* important. How you influence others is the most important.

It takes courage to accept the challenge of influencing another person. Do not underestimate that challenge. In most cases, the people who report directly to you will spend more time with you than with their families. You will occupy their thoughts (positively or negatively) more than most other people, and you will be the subject of stories around the bar or the dinner table more times than you can imagine. When they go to lunch they will talk about you. When you lead meetings they will evaluate you. You are on their minds, whether you want to be or not. Leadership is not a job for cowards!

It's time to adjust your perspective on your job as a leader. You do not lead an organization, department, or group, and your people do not follow strategic plans, fancy goals, or year-end reports. They follow a person. If you are their leader, that person needs to be you. Begin with the idea of influence and your role will start to take shape.

I sat in a room with ten high-level executives from the same industry. I had been invited to speak to them about courage. It was a train wreck. After the train wreck there was dinner and a reception. At the reception, I was talking with the senior vice president of a large company. Once he loosened up a little and realized I wasn't there to coach him or diagnose him, he shared an interesting story.

He had been a top salesperson in his company for years. He was relentless in his pursuit of the numbers and the prestige that comes with being a top performer. He always exceeded expectations and

thought he was more or less guaranteed the highest and best awards the company had. He was promoted to sales manager and, true to form, his team hit it out of the park every quarter. He was clearly a star and wasn't afraid to throw his success and influence around to get what he wanted.

One day his boss called him into his office and told him that if things didn't change, he would be fired. He almost fell off the chair. "Me? The superhero? The guy who led the most successful team in the company? How could this be?"

Then his boss hit him right between the eyes. He told him that his team hated him, the other teams disrespected him, and he didn't have a clue about how to relate to people. People were just a means to an end for him. The next thing he knew, they had hired a coach for him and he began *the* most difficult transformation of his career. Without the intervention of his insightful boss, it is likely his career would have been derailed. With all of the prizes and plaques and accolades, he still would have failed.

Now before you go off saying, "Oh, I'm nothing like that," just take a step back and look at the real moral of that story. Don't compare your behavior to his; compare your awareness. His trouble was as much about his awareness as it was his actual behavior. Even though he was wildly successful, he didn't know what he was doing. Oh, he had the technical expertise, but he didn't have any insight into the extent to which he was messing with people's lives. He didn't understand that his award-winning results had a great price. He made money but lost the respect of those he worked with and, worse, he damaged the relationships that were necessary to his success. He was blinded by his great results and lack of awareness.

In his case, he was lucky enough to have a boss who stopped him in his tracks and plainly said, "Hey, not only are you messing *with* people's lives, but you are also messing *up* people's lives." What's fortunate is that his boss was courageous enough to tell him, in so many words, that all his success was not worth it to the company unless he made some major changes. His boss understood how to be influential in a constructive way. He possessed and demonstrated an understanding of his influence.

Do you know what you are doing? Do you have the courage to honestly answer that question? Here are five questions to get you started:

1. Take an honest look at your leadership mindset. Do you appreciate and respect the fact that you are messing with people's lives? What makes you think that?
2. Is that awareness apparent in the way you carry yourself and interact with the people you influence? Take a moment to write down or think about a few times when you have successfully used your influence.
3. Do you have balance between the results you create and the human impact of those results? Have there been times when the cost to your relationships was too high, even though the results were good? What would you do differently in the future?
4. Find a person you trust to give you the clear and constructive truth about the positive and negative impact of your behavior. What did they say?
5. What are some small, incremental adjustments you can make to your behavior to emphasize the positive impacts?

For a download of a worksheet for this chapter and others please go to www.leadershipisntforcowards.com or scan the QR code.



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