

“THE change you

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want to see in the world
starts with you.”





THE FIRST ABSOLUTE
FOR LEADERS:

LEAD

Remember the thrilling rush of freedom, the motivating jolt of pride, the first time you pedaled all alone on a two-wheeled bike? As you propelled yourself forward in that glorious moment there was, for most of us, someone looking on that made it possible. In their seemingly modest actions can be found the DNA of powerful leadership: a mode of being that is less about analytics and decision-making, and much more about aligning, motivating, and empowering others. ⇒

Your people drive financial performance: Who's on the bikes and how they feel is more important than where those bikes are going. The nearly irrefutable lesson gleaned from over a century of management theory and practice—a message reinforced by endless data and anecdotes from the great business gurus like Tom Peters and Jim Collins—is that great companies that get the people part right tend to get everything else right, too.

Fact is, we hyper-focus on numbers because numbers are, in a word, easy. They follow rules; they can be manipulated at will. People, well, not so much.

So here's the question. How do you get your people pedaling with that freedom and pride?

How do you get the people part right?

There's a story about Gandhi, perhaps apocryphal but widely told. A mother brought her young son before the Mahatma to ask him to help cure him of his obsession with sugar. Gandhi said, "Bring your boy back in a week, and then I will speak to him."

A week later the mother returned with her son, and Gandhi told the boy, "Stop eating sweets. They are not good for you." Realizing that was *it*, that was all the great leader was going to say, the mother was understandably confused.

"You could have told him that last week—why did you have us come back?" she asked.

"Last week," Gandhi replied, "I, too, was eating a great deal of sugar." Moral of the story: The change you want to see in the world starts with you.

**Leadership is grace
and restraint.**

The line between confidence and cockiness is humbleness.

Spirited e-mails filled with bold announcements, rah-rah company retreats, or enlightened HR policies and the like are all meaningless abstractions unless they're grounded in the everyday concrete example you, as leader, set for the organization. Gandhi may have introduced us to this model of the humble leader leading by example, but it's been validated more recently by the capitalist gurus found at the corporate ashram we know today as IBM.

A few years back, IBM researchers huddled up to identify the traits of their most high-impact employees. What they found was that ambition alone was only mediocre; ambition plus *intellectual humility* was the winning combination. They dubbed this trait *humbition*. Summed up by William Taylor, the co-founder of *Fast Company* magazine and the author of *Practically Radical*, "They understood that if you want to have an impact today, your job is no longer to be the smartest person in the room, and your job is not to solve every problem and identify every opportunity. Your job is to ask yourself: What does it mean to be an impact player in a world where nobody alone is as smart as everybody together?"

**Balance heroics
with humility.**

In other words, great leaders must be constantly ready to find their next best ideas in the mouths of their most junior employee. Being a leader isn't about enforcement, but empowerment—which means being **all in, all the time**, living and breathing the success of the organization. Being “the change you want,” with employees, and with customers, too.

When people hit the top of the corporate pyramid, they can start to feel isolated, a cohort of one sitting on a very sharp point. And then another pyramid appears, inverted and pointed down at them, filled with layer upon layer of constituencies: media, stockholders, analysts, unions. . . .

To avoid being speared, you must focus your best energy on the only two groups that have more power than you to make your company successful: your customers and your employees. Everything else is a distraction.

As the leader of an organization, therefore, you must maintain two perspectives. One is “outside in,” understanding how your customers perceive and interact with your organization. The other is “inside out,” constantly putting yourself in your employees' shoes. Do they feel cared for? Do they have ample opportunity to grow? Do they know they matter? It's your job to tell them, again and again, by building a culture that constantly celebrates their efforts.

Leadership also requires you to find the careful balance between two faces: your authentic humanity, with all its fickle rhythms and unvarnished blemishes, and your symbolic role as the head of the

**Words motivate,
actions inspire.**



organization. Although your focus is always on the people—the individuals—on your team, in *their* eyes you are at times a function, and not a person. Having a “gray day” doesn’t relinquish your responsibility to set the team’s reality. People must be able to look in your eyes and feel in their bellies, “We *will* make it together.”

Which brings us back to Gandhi and humbition. Leadership requires a unique ability to balance confidence, restraint, and authenticity with the humility and good sense to rise above “me” to

Your road is the “high road”—always,
with no exceptions.

embrace “we.” Paul “Bear” Bryant, the legendary University of Alabama football coach, got it perfectly when he said, “If anything goes bad, I did it. If anything goes semi-good, we did it. If anything goes really good, then you did it. That’s all it takes to get people to win football games for you.” And, it can be said, to get people to win at the game of business.

True leadership isn’t heroism. Heroism is episodic, while leadership is *systemic*, defined by a hundred things, big and small, mostly sacrifices, done every day with consistency and sincerity. It’s not your job to be a hero, but instead to help create and celebrate them. ✨

To lead others,
you must first lead yourself.



THINGS TO LISTEN FOR

WHEN LEAD
IS IN PLACE . . .

“I recognize how fortunate I am to have this opportunity.”

“We are going to figure this out.”

“How can we turn this crisis into an opportunity?”

WHEN THERE IS A
NEED FOR LEAD . . .

“Without me, this would have been a disaster.”

“Why we’re doing this is not important, just get it done.”

“Who is responsible for this?”

IDEAS FOR ACTION

Do



Humility as an Anchor

CULTIVATE HUMILITY The fresh air at and near the top of the corporate ladder smells fine. It is also the perfect microclimate to breed arrogance. You are, after all, an extremely capable person. So few have done what you've done. You've developed many skills through many experiences. Some people might even say you are wise.

All might be true—and yet, you need to find a way to cultivate humility. Too much self-confidence narrows your peripheral vision. Leading your organization as though you've got it all figured out makes you and your company a target for negative surprises. Humility keeps you aware, alert, and nimble.

Consciously cultivate curiosity, ask good questions, and listen to new and possibly unconventional ideas that keep your business healthy. Create a rolling schedule of novel experiences and opportunities to learn so that you can easily slip into your “beginner” suit. Get out of your office, often. And embrace these powerful phrases: *I don't know. Help me understand. You're right!*

DEMONSTRATE GRACE AND PATIENCE In some circles, impatience is considered a virtue. It's mistakenly equated with being results-driven. In some rare instances when deadlines continually get missed, results aren't there, or standards are slack, then absolutely a show of hot-tempered disappointment is appropriate.

But let's be very clear: Impatience doesn't inspire high performance, it inspires fear, which can be as debilitating to your team's critical thinking and engagement as alcohol or drugs.

Recall what happened inside the cockpit of Air France Flight 447 before it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean in 2009: Its pilot, terrified and inexperienced, kept pulling back the stick, despite the fact that it was clearly leading them into a steep descent. *Popular Mechanics* called his actions irrational but not inexplicable, explaining, "Intense psychological stress tends to shut down the part of the brain responsible for innovative, creative thought. Instead, we tend to revert to the familiar and the well-rehearsed." In other words, the pilot defaulted to the maneuvers he knew best, those performed at low altitude. There, pulling back the stick would have saved them, instead of crashing them into the fathoms.

So, ease up on the stick. Embrace the oxymoronic motto of Emperor Augustus and "make haste slowly" (*festina lente*). Grace under pressure and patience flow from humility, and are what turn crisis into opportunity.

REMEMBER YOUR “WHY” Keep things in perspective. Why are you in the position you are in? What is your purpose? Put business results and bonuses aside, and consider your leadership legacy. How are you changing each and every life your leadership touches? Staying grounded in a broader sense of purpose can produce a ripple effect of positive change in people—change that may not fit neatly into a strategy deck but helps meet business goals in surprising and intangible ways.

If you have no clear definition of your greater purpose, how do you know what you’re really looking to achieve? How do you know whether you’re winning or losing? For that matter, how do you know why you’re putting in those 14-hour days in the first place?

When you can answer the “why” of your work with a clear, crisp answer that comes equally from your head and your heart, almost inevitably there is a shift from focusing on the short-term bottom line to the long-term goal; from errors to opportunities; from imposing control to instilling confidence.

Shifting from “I” to “We”

LEAD IN SERVICE TO OTHERS As a leader it can be tempting to make it about you. Your team is orbiting around you, the sun. In the dry wit of the 1920s classic, *Wisdom in Small Doses*, “It is well to remember that the entire universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others.” At the end of the day, it is not about you. It’s about the business, it’s about the customers, it’s about your employees. You are responsible for so many people’s welfare. That is the weight of the position you hold.

BE A STEWARD OF THE ORGANIZATION Your role as leader of an organization is not permanent. Think of yourself less as a life-appointed Supreme Court Justice—beholden to no one, swayed by nothing—and more as the President trying to have as impactful a four-year term as possible on the constituencies you were elected to represent. If every day you work to make the lives of your employees and customers better, there's a good chance you'll last longer than the five years that is the average tenure of a CEO.



TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY Share the credit, accept the blame. Being a leader is different from being a hero. A hero gets to come in and save the day and bask in the accolades during the victory parade. Not so for a leader. A leader's work is about empowering other people to step up and take responsibility and then catching them when they fall, all the while maintaining that you are accountable for the success or failure of the entire business. The biggest obstacle to teams reaching their fullest potential is an absence of accountability. Display a standard for it at the very top—rigorously, consistently, and publicly—and all the teams in your organization will follow suit. It's not easy, but that's the job.

Being All in, All the Time

WATCH YOUR MOODS You aren't just anybody; you are the boss. Employees are scrutinizing your tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and demeanor, constantly looking to decipher whatever it is they think you're not saying. Sharpen your self-awareness and exude stability so that people won't be distracted by small dips in your emotional trend line, or project their anxieties onto your haphazard squint.

Regardless, you will have some bad days, experience stress, and need to vent. Find a safe person to confide in—it could be your spouse, an executive coach, or a mentor. When you know you have a place to take your concerns and discuss them openly, you'll find it easier to maintain your Lincoln-like composure throughout the rest of the day.

STAY PRESENT Rushing from one meeting to the next. Ruminating over concerns about future projections. Having to multi-task and shift gears quickly. All of these things contribute to mental exhaustion and distraction. Do what you can to stay focused and present. Protect time on your calendar for necessary reflection. Find rituals that help you prepare for your day and wrap it up. The more you can minimize the scattered feeling, the more people will perceive that you are present and attentive to the issue at hand.

KEEP YOUR WORDS AND ACTIONS CONSISTENT Your integrity is paramount. It's a threshold requirement for the position you hold. A lot rides on whether people believe that they can trust you. Studies show that employees who trust their senior leaders are more engaged at work. Think about how the performance of the entire organization can be influenced by your integrity. Do what's right. Say what you mean. Keep your word. If you can't keep your word, make amendments to your word and acknowledge the change. Take responsibility. Share the right information with the right people. Put the well-being of your employees, customers, and the organization first. ■

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that the entire universe,
with one trifling exception,
is composed of others.”

JOHN ANDREW HOLMES, *Wisdom in Small Doses*

*Questions for
reflection . . .*

How do I maintain
composure under stress?

Do I share credit
but take the blame?

Am I more focused
on image or results?

How do I stay in touch
with the business and
our customers?

What do I do every
day that inspires and
motivates others?

In what situations
am I more likely to react
versus respond?

