

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2014*

Article 5

February 2014

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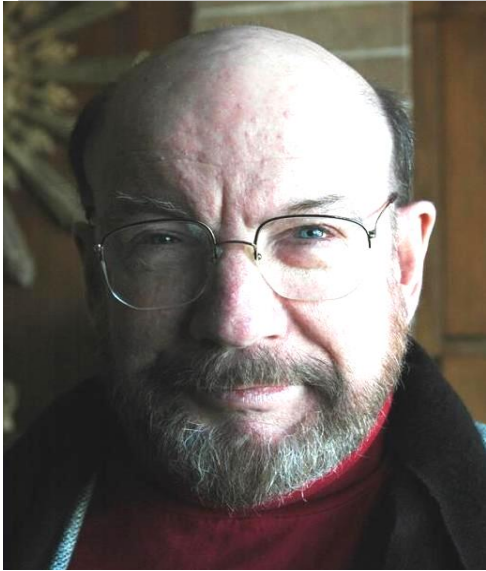
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Recommended Citation

Renesch, John (2014) "The System Has a Hole In It: Why Leaders Don't Follow Their Heroes' Examples," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol7/iss1/5>

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The System Has a Hole In It:

Why Leaders Don't Follow Their Heroes' Examples

JOHN RENESCH

For decades now, I have been hearing complaints about the time and money “wasted” on leadership development in corporations and organizations of all types. Estimates as high as tens of billions of dollars are spent in the U.S. alone, trying to make better leaders out of managers. This seems ridiculous when the vast majority of executives approving these expenditures seem to agree that it is not money well-spent. And how about all the *time* wasted by executives sitting through yet another training program delivering the “flavor of the month” in leadership curriculum?

Curious about why corporations continue to throw money away in this way, I started examining this situation from a system perspective. I learned many years ago that when good people keep

Clockwise (l-r): Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Malala Yousafzai, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Winston Churchill



trying to fix a problem and it doesn't go away, it is usually a "systems problem" — not a "people problem."

Several years ago, I was approached by David Kyle to coach him and his associate Gary Heil who wanted to write a book based on an international study they had conducted of organizational leaders. The aim of their study was to explore the "aspiration gap" – the delta between what leaders aspired to be as compared to how they were actually performing.

Naturally, my interest was piqued given my already-aroused curiosity about all the wasted efforts in the field of leadership development. After crafting several drafts, the project was cancelled. Recently, I contacted Kyle to see what had come of the book and discovered it was never published. Kyle sent me what they had written to date. With his permission, the following excerpt from their unpublished manuscript¹ is replicated:

The data says employees don't feel engaged. The only characteristic through the ages that all great leaders have in common is inspired followers. We can see from the research today that there are far less inspired followers than what there needs to be. This becomes really problematic in a world where change is everything and leaders are focused on the future. If you, as a leader, are not engaged in a way that you're willing to start to move the organization toward the future, and what you focus on is a job instead of a cause, you will have a problem engaging people in the work. So, we wanted to find out why is it that leaders aren't creating inspired followers? Why is it that, for all the talk about intrinsically motivating environments, we're not doing it very often in our organizations?

They started with a simple request: "Give us a list of leaders, living or dead, that you most admire." A list was produced and, of course, almost 80% of these leaders they'd never met before. That list included leaders from Winston Churchill to Martin Luther King to Mother Theresa.

The interesting insight we had after interviewing over 400 leaders on three continents is how they described great leaders. Their descriptions were all about traits of the leader and the personal characteristics of the leader. Over and over again in interviews, regardless of what name they put at the top of the paper, similar characteristics of leadership would be cited....So the fact that these people thought these leadership traits created that engagement was not as interesting as when we asked the next question which was, "How often are you like this? How often do you live consistently with these traits that you admire?"

They found that admiring a trait is very different from putting it into practice. Their interviewees admired certain traits but, most admitted freely, there was a pretty substantial gap between what they admired and the way they acted on a daily basis.

¹ David Kyle and Gary Heil's unpublished manuscript is titled "Awaken Your Leadership: To Create Organizational Environments that Motivate You and Your Employees for Purpose and Success." David Kyle has worked in a variety of organizational settings and positions as a manager, director, and executive. His consulting is focused primarily in executive development and coaching of CEOs. Gary Heil is an author, director, lawyer, and founder of the Center for Innovative Leadership. He advises companies and management teams (both public and private sector) on leadership, innovation and change.

Most thought they rarely lived or acted consistently with the traits they admired in their heroes.

So we asked them, “Why the gap? What inhibits you from living these traits?” This was the point where they started giving reasons for not living out these traits they admired. We originally thought their answers were excuses. They said things like; “You don’t understand the people we have working for us.” “How do you ever know that’ll make money?” “If you do that, you might not get the same results as quickly.” “My boss won’t let me do it; he won’t support that.” “The organization would never support that radical a change in the way we lead.” “The processes were set up in a different way.”

In almost all of their interviews, it became apparent that the managers always had an external reason for not living up to their own standards of leadership. Kyle and Heil reported that: “We don’t recall one person in an interview who ever said, ‘You know I just don’t have the nerve to do it.’ ‘I just don’t have the courage to lead that way.’ ‘You know, it’s my fault, know I should do it, but I’m just not that kind of guy.’ They all had some external reason why they couldn’t do it.” Reading this, I was reminded of a saying from the 1970s during the peak of the human potential movement: “You either have what you want or the reasons why you don’t.”

Later in the interview, one question in particular produced some rather startling responses: “Although you say you don’t consistently live these leadership characteristics you admire, have there been times in your career that you’ve acted in accord with your leadership ideals?” Many of the interviewees stated that in emergencies, situations where they had to act quickly and decisively, they would act very differently, “Because you act before you think,” as one person put it. The authors elaborate on this surprise finding:

What our interviewees told us was: “You lead by involving everybody because you need their ideas or you could die or fail quickly. In emergencies, you’re not so narcissistic about your own political well-being because the whole time, the obviousness of success or failure affects you all the more quickly... so I had to be more goal-oriented.”

They told us that they included more ideas from everyone. They listened to the ideas of others more closely because they needed them and knew they needed them because failure was so close. They also trusted their gut more because they weren’t thinking so much about how to do it or how they’d be perceived because success or failure was their goal for the team, not so much their own personal gain. The interesting observation our interviewees described was when the emergency went away, their behavior went back to their normal pattern of leadership. They discovered in the emergency they could lead closer to their aspirations. They could live what they admire.

Kyle and Heil concluded from all this that in non-emergency settings, people are motivated to avoid conflict and confrontation. What they concluded is that the corporate “environment” (or what I would call “culture”) needs to allow for people to lead the way their heroes lead.

I would call this a *systems problem*, where the corporate culture – the philosophy, values, practices, and traditions of the organization – fails to allow and support courageous action and innovation in its people. Most organizational cultures, left to shape themselves, tend to become dysfunctional, stifling any behavior that contradicts the status quo.

A conscious culture must be intentionally created by the organization’s leaders and adopted by everyone. This makes for a more conscious company, a more functional enterprise, and a more enlivened organization.

About the Author

John Renesch is a San Francisco-based businessman-turned-futurist. He’s an international keynote speaker and has published 14 books and hundreds of articles on leadership and organizational and social transformation. He’s received much praise as a business/social seer: Warren Bennis, best-selling American author of leadership books for thirty years, calls John “a wise elder who shines with wisdom.” Stanford University’s School of Business’s Michael Ray calls him “a beacon lighting the way to a new paradigm.” His latest book is *The Great Growing Up; Being Responsible for Humanity’s Future*.

For more information about Renesch, visit www.Renesch.com.