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## [Commonsense Leadership for Uncommon Times](#)

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Commonsense Leadership for Uncommon Times

By James P. Evans

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Growing up back home in Illinois, we called it horse sense. As we got a little older, we learned it was really commonsense. We begin to acquire commonsense about the time we turn 20 or so. Prior to that, of course, there is no commonsense. Just ask your mother. How many times during your teen years did she eye you up and down and say, “Don’t you have any commonsense?!”

Well, no, mom. Not really.

So, we begin to acquire commonsense about the time we enter the workplace. Some people acquire it faster and apply it better. They become leaders. Others acquire it slowly or not at all and apply it only on rare occasions. They become all sorts of things. You can read about many of them in the daily newspaper. You may have read about the two young robbers who tried to open up an automatic teller machine. They wrapped a chain around it, hooked it to their bumper and tried to drive away with it. Instead the bumper ripped off the car. They took off in a panic, leaving the ATM, chain and bumper—complete with their license plate. The police returned it later than night when they picked the pair up. So much for commonsense.

That’s a true example. You can probably think of several, yourself.

Before we go any further, let’s define just what we’re talking about. What is commonsense? And how does it apply to something as complex as

leadership?

Well, here's my simple definition: Commonsense is the ability to do the right thing at the right moment, most of the time. That's all. Some people do it naturally. Others...well, most of us...have to train ourselves to apply commonsense, especially when we come to the greater question of applying commonsense to leadership.

So, what are commonsense leaders?

Let's begin by defining what leaders are. Leaders are builders. They build on the excitement of others, they build on strengths, they build bridges that take us from where we are to places we probably wouldn't go without a leader. Leaders create commitment. They are people who inspire and who aren't afraid to perspire. Leaders create a climate in which others can succeed. They make it possible for others to be more, do more, give more than they could have done without the leader.

Think about leaders for a moment. Pick one in your mind. What words would you use to describe that individual?

Tough, adaptable, warm, can listen, can communicate, flexible, generous, dynamic, oriented toward people, independent, honest, sense of humor, vision etc. Now, let's apply commonsense to leadership.

A commonsense leader is one who combines those words with the ability to know that most things in life are pretty much commonsense.

Here's commonsense applied to leaders:

- Commonsense Leaders have goals. They have vision. They know where they are going.
- Commonsense Leaders know the people who work with them. These are the people who will help achieve those goals, reach that vision. They know how to delegate responsibility
- Commonsense Leaders are agents of change. They must be.
- Commonsense Leaders see change as opportunity.
- Commonsense Leaders are honest, decent people. They are fair.
- Commonsense Leaders are consensus builders and skilled communicators.

- Commonsense Leaders have a sense of humor.
- Commonsense Leaders know themselves. They are not afraid of making mistakes. They are self-confident and decisive.
- Commonsense Leaders have a good work ethic.
- Commonsense Leaders are courageous.
- And  
Commonsense Leaders know that it's only commonsense to treat their people with professional and personal respect, making them feel part of the plan, see the vision.

Vision is a key word here and I hope you won't forget it. One of the most important characteristics of Commonsense Leaders is that they see better, further and in greater depth and detail than most people.

- Commonsense leaders have the vision to know themselves.
- Commonsense leaders have the vision to inspire others and generate commitment.
- Commonsense leaders have the vision to see success beyond each challenge.
- Commonsense leaders have the vision to see life as the greatest of all opportunities.

In other words, commonsense leaders have commonsense attitudes about themselves, about others, about their job and about life.

Vision is the key ingredient in leadership. Vision is a sense of the future. Vision is the ability to look ahead and see yesterday, today and tomorrow all in the same view.

“Good leaders create a vision. They articulate the vision, passionately own the vision, and relentlessly drive it to completion.” –Jack Welch, GE

The leader's vision will and must pull an organization into the future.

Take out your wallet or open your purse. I'll just bet you've got a VISA card in there somewhere. While you think about the size of your current balance, let me tell a short story about the power of vision.

Dee Hock, the founder and CEO Emeritus of VISA, tells this story of great vision that clearly looked to the future as he thought about himself, his colleagues, his job and his lifestyle.

Your VISA card began as a charge card called BankAmericard in the 1950s. Some of you probably remember it. Credit cards in those days were a new industry and by 1968, it was out of control with losses thought to be in the tens of millions of dollars. Hock had the vision to see beyond today into tomorrow.

“It was necessary to reconceive, in the most fundamental sense, the nature of bank, money, and credit card; even beyond that to the essential elements of each and how they might change in a microelectronics environment. Several conclusions emerged: first: money had become nothing but guaranteed, alphanumeric data recorded in valueless paper and metal. It would eventually become guaranteed data in the form of arranged electrons and photons which would move around the world at the speed of light. Second: ‘credit card’ was a misnomer, a false concept. It was a device for the exchange of value.”—Dee Hock

From this thinking came a new way of envisioning money and, next, an entirely new global network for the exchange of money. In 1970, it was only a vision. Today, it is a worldwide network with nearly 400 million people making more than 8 billion transactions annually.

How’s that for the power of vision?

Commonsense leadership begins, then, with vision. Vision challenges your organization because, sooner or later, it will force them to change.—Jim Evans

Tom Melohn agrees.

Melohn is the genius who re-engineered North American Tool and Die and wrote about it in his book,

The New Partnership. Melohn envisioned a new partnership with each member of the workforce. He had the vision to inspire others and generate commitment.

I’m willing to listen to Tom Melohn because he bet everything he had on his theories. It took every cent he had to buy North American Tool and Die a few years ago. It became a highly successful laboratory for his management and leadership principles.

He began with a simple vision that became the basis for his action plan.

1. To grow the company profitably
2. To share the wealth
3. To have fun

To implement that action plan, he had four steps:

1. Hire only good people who care.
2. These people are the same as you and me.
3. Treat your fellow employees just the way you want to be treated.
4. The person doing the job knows it better than anyone else.

If those all sound, well, soft, consider this: In 10 years, sales were up 28 percent annually; pretax earnings were up 2,400 percent; productivity was up 480 percent; employee turnover was less than four percent; absenteeism was less than one percent; and the company was in the top 10 percent of the Fortune 500.

His secret?

A commonsense vision about his people. Instead of complaining about the changing workforce, Melohn recognized that his co-workers were his most important asset.

That's the philosophy of a commonsense leader. Melohn says a leader is someone with a nonnegotiable set of values and a love of humanity. That's commonsense if I ever heard it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's look at the four parts of a commonsense leader's vision, one at a time.

- Commonsense leaders have the vision to know themselves.

What did you want to be when you grew up? There's was a clever television commercial on not long ago in which a small boy answers that question by saying, "I want to claw my way up to middle management!"

What did you want?

Did you decide at age 12 or so that you wanted to be a leader? Most of us didn't. But somewhere along the line, the desire developed. It's commonsense. If you are going to be a good leader, you must have the desire.

Not everyone can or should be a leader. You've got to have the desire. The desire to lead the way. The desire to take on difficult problems. The desire to go a step beyond. And, of course, the desire to be a leader of others.

- Commonsense leaders have the vision to inspire others and generate commitment.

A commonsense leader understands that his or her success rides squarely on the shoulders of the people they lead. And they understand that those people have changed drastically in the last few years.

You don't have to look more than a generation back to find individuals who worked for the same company their entire working life. So what happened? Or, of greater importance, why is it changing now? Well, one thing that happened is that we learned some hard lessons during the 1980s. In a single phrase, We learned that on a global economic playing field, we weren't good enough anymore.

Our expectations were too low. We weren't demanding world class in our products and services. "Okay" product quality isn't good enough. Superior customer service is critical. Speed in innovation is essential.

Joseph Gorman, president and CEO of TRW, figured it out. "The crisis we are facing is competitive failure," he said. "We need an on-going labor/management miracle. This cannot and will not be accomplished without major changes in how we conduct our businesses. Business as usual must be totally unacceptable."

He was telling us we didn't know the people we were leading.

He was demanding that we rethink not only what we were doing, but why and how, as well. He also went straight to the core of both the problem and the solution—the work force, or to put it in more human terms, our co-workers, the people who work for and with us.

We must have a work force that cares more, knows more and does more. Our co-workers must be more involved with our success or failure. They must care about and

take pride in what they and what we are doing.

We can't take our employees for granted anymore. Not if we intend to remain profitable. Not if we intend to survive.

- Commonsense leaders have the vision to see success beyond each challenge.

What's your job? Manager? Supervisor? Just how do you see yourself and your job?

Leadership guru Warren Bennis offers this comparison:

“Leaders are people who do the right things. Managers are people who do things right. There's a profound difference. When you think about the right things, your mind immediately goes toward thinking about the future, thinking about dreams, missions, visions, strategic intent, purpose. But when you think about doing things right, you think about control mechanisms. You think about how-to. Leaders ask the what and why questions, not the how questions. Leaders think about empowerment, not control. And the best definition of empowerment is that you don't steal responsibility from your people.”

Bennis adds this observation: American businesses are over managed and underled.

We have a generation of managers who are trained to keep things as they are and to preserve the system. Leadership, on the other hand, requires creating what isn't, something new, something beyond the system. By definition, that means taking risks. Managers, even the very good ones, do not know how to do that very well. Leaders do.

- Commonsense leaders have the vision to see life as the greatest of all opportunities.
- Men and women who lead share several commonsense characteristics. They have vision. They know where they want their organization to be in the future. And they have the ability to communicate that vision to others. Without that ability, they are not leaders—just dreamers. And they have integrity. They must have an absolute dedication to doing what they know is right.
- General Norman Schwarzkofit summed it up: “If it ever came to a choice between compromising my moral principles and the performance of my duties, I know I'd go with my principles.” Integrity. Without it, you can't lead because no one will follow you.



- Commonsense

leaders also understand trust, and they know it works both ways. A leader must be trustworthy, and, at the same time, trust his or her people. They are committed. Now, more than ever, leaders must be seen to be caring and nurturing. They must be committed.

- There is one more characteristic they share. And it, too, is commonsense.

The leader will be tough—a tough inner strength tempered with character.

Here is the essential difference between managers and leaders. There's a general unwillingness of most managers to lead. They may know in their hearts what must be done—but they're not willing to make the tough, often unpopular decisions—the risky decisions. Most managers will do the politically expedient thing, rather than what is morally correct.

And, at the end of the day, the commonsense leader has the vision to relax and reflect. Former Army Chief of Staff Gordon R. Sullivan suggests that, at the end of the day, you ask yourself three questions:

What is happening? What is not happening? How can I influence the situation?

Taking time to reflect at the end of the day is one of the toughest habits for a dynamic leader to develop. It isn't easy. It is, however, commonsense.

And that's what leadership is about, doing commonsense things in a way that inspires others with the common sense of what you are doing and makes them stand at your side because it is the right thing to do.

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