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# John R. Wooden, Stephen R. Covey and Servant Leadership

A Commentary

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that “consistency was the hobgoblin of little minds” and that insight well underscores the challenges associated with accurately describing the leadership philosophy (and actions) of anyone — from coaches like John Wooden, leadership gurus like Steve Covey and Peter Drucker, philosophers like Aristotle and Socrates, or you and me. They are not always perfectly consistent, evolving, and even changing as situations and settings shift in both anticipated and unpredictable ways.

## **LIFE AS A JOURNEY**

While Jenkins points many of these inconsistencies out, I suspect that Wooden, Covey, Drucker, Aristotle, Socrates — and you and me — would be the first to acknowledge that life is not a journey along either a single or very straightforward pathway.

However, this is not to say that we won’t enjoy more happiness and success (significance) if we have principles to guide us (Wooden), or habits (Covey) to serve as signposts along our paths to the future. There really is no freeway to the future and we’re better able to deal with uncertainties, hardships, dilemmas, tribulations, challenges, successes, and joys if we have, as individuals and as leaders, values to guide our journey, habits to provide some structure, some intentionality about what we’d like to do along the road, and where we might like to end up.

Still, as most of us realize, that despite our most noble intentions we often get sidetracked, even waylaid on occasion, and have to recalibrate and even change course. This is a reality that every sailor knows full well – there is no straight path between where we launch the boat and where we wish to end up and disembark. Indeed, there are even times when we find that what we were looking for isn’t all that grand once achieved or that better options (and ideals) are revealed as we move forward.

Talk with any entrepreneur or venture capitalist and they’ll tell you that the start-up’s original product or service idea was not the one that eventually came to fruition. With new information, as the result of struggles and hardships, some disappointments, a few small wins, environmental changes, and so on — these original plans changed the world in a way that the founders didn’t initially set out to do, and we’re all probably better off as a consequence of that deviation (was it a deviation, or just a juncture that was hidden at the start, seems like a Divine question!).

## **CLARITY OF LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY**

In our own leadership research [1] we ask people about how clear they are about their philosophy of leadership. What we find is that leaders who report being most clear about their leadership philosophy also report being the most committed to their organization's success, clear about what's expected of them, and effective in meeting the demands of their work. Those who are least clear about their leadership philosophy are also significantly less proud to tell people about the work they do or feel that they are making much of a difference. We also ask their constituents for their assessment of that leader's clarity, and the pattern is the same. Their managers assess leaders with vague or ambiguous leadership philosophies as nearly 30 percent less effective than those viewed as having clarity about their leadership philosophy. This same disparity is found in the perspectives of co-workers and peers.

What impact does being clear about their leadership philosophy have on their direct reports? The empirical relationship between the degree of spirit de corps, commitment and motivation reported by direct reports is directly, and significantly, related with the extent they perceive that their leaders are clear about their leadership philosophy. How much they report trusting their leader, and being clear about what's expected of them, is also significantly related to how clear they feel their leaders are about their leadership philosophy. The data shows that almost 20 percent of the variance in the level of engagement of direct reports is explained by how clear they report their leaders are about their leadership philosophy. These findings lend some empirical evidence to "why," as Jenkins observes, Wooden is considered one of the greatest coaches (leaders) of all time.

## **CONCLUSION**

The greatest leaders, in any field, and in any time, are those who eventually put the needs of others ahead of their own. They move from pushing their own agendas to pulling forward the agenda of their constituents and in the process effectively use their own talents, resources, and energies to make others great. Paradoxically, they transform their followers into leaders themselves, which accounts in large part to the enduring legacy of leadership. And, they also realize that greatness in any endeavor (sports or business) is not the providence of a single person but that the results come from the efforts of many people. "You can't do it alone" is their mantra.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Kouzes, J.M. and Posner, B.Z., *Great Leadership Creates Great Workplaces*, Wiley, San Francisco, 2013.