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The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: How Ordinary People Make Extraordinary Things Happen

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were at their “personal best” in leading others. We devised a Personal-Best Leadership Experience Survey consisting of 38-item open-ended questions. In our initial research, we collected and analyzed more than 550 of these surveys, each requiring 1 to 2 hours to complete. We reviewed an additional 80 short-form versions of the questionnaire and conducted 42 in-depth interviews. A thematic analysis of the leadership cases revealed clusters of behaviors that we identified as the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®. Our research is ongoing, and to date we’ve examined more than 5,000 personal-best leadership case studies and over 2 million leadership assessments from around the world. In this entry, we describe the Five Practices, give a brief comment about each from one of the leaders in our studies, present evidence that supports the impact of the Five Practices on constituent engagement and organizational performance, and suggest further reading about our work and that of other scholars and practitioners.

Fundamentals

While each leadership case is unique in its particulars, every story we’ve collected follows comparable patterns of action. In doing their best, leaders model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. These are the fundamentals of leadership. They remain as relevant today as they were when we first began our studies.

Model the Way

In talking about her personal-best leadership experience Olivia Lai, senior marketing associate at Moody’s Analytics (Hong Kong), said to us, “In order for me to become a leader it’s important that I first define my values and principles. If I don’t know what my own values are and determine expectations for myself, how can I set expectations for others?” The first step on any leadership journey is to *clarify values* and give voice to those values.

Eloquent speeches about common values, however, aren’t nearly enough. Actions are far more important than words when constituents want to determine how serious leaders really are about what they say. Exemplary leaders *set the example* through their daily actions, demonstrating deep commitment

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Our leadership framework has its origins in a research project we, the authors, began in 1983. We wanted to know what people did when they

to shared values. Casey Mork, manager of a new product development team, told us he learned this lesson early on: “You’ve got to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. Leaders are responsible for modeling behavior based on the values they communicate.” As Casey discovered, leading others is about living the values every day.

Inspire a Shared Vision

People described their personal-best leadership experiences as times when they imagined an exciting, highly attractive future for their organization. Nancy Zimpher, chancellor of the State University of New York, for example, said, “Vision trumps everything. Organizations are most effective when a well-articulated and ambitious vision of the future exists.” Exemplary leaders *envision the future*. In fact, our data show that focusing on the future is the attribute that most sets leaders apart from individual contributors.

Exemplary leaders also know that they can’t command commitment. They have to inspire it by *enlisting others* in a common vision. Just ask Buddy Blanton, a programs manager at Northrop Grumman Corporation. Buddy, wanting to know how he could be more effective at creating a shared vision, asked his team for feedback. They told him, “Help us, as a team, to understand how you got to your vision. We want to walk with you while you create the goals and vision so we all get to the end vision together.” This experience taught Buddy that by engaging others in finding common good, unity of purpose can be forged.

Challenge the Process

Challenge is the crucible for greatness. That’s precisely what Katherine Winkel, marketing operations manager at Seattle Genetics, observed when reflecting on her peers’ personal-best leadership experiences. “The similarity that most stuck out in my mind was that in each story the person described having to overcome uncertainty and fear in order to achieve their best.” Every single personal-best leadership case involved a change from the status quo. No one sat idly by waiting for fate to smile upon him or her.

And because innovative change comes more from listening than from telling, exemplary leaders are constantly looking outside themselves and their

organization for the clues about what’s new or different, and what possibilities others are not seeing. They *search for opportunities* to innovate, grow, and improve.

Exemplary leaders also *experiment and take risks*. But sometimes people are afraid, and one way leaders deal with this reluctance is to approach change through incremental steps, small wins, and continuous learning. When Venkat Dokiparthi was asked to lead a technical development team in India he realized that “I needed to break down the task and make it simple for them to feel successful.” Small wins catapult leaders and their team forward and motivate them to move ahead even when times get tough.

Enable Others to Act

No leader ever got anything extraordinary done by working alone. It requires a team effort. That’s exactly what Eric Pan, regional head of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants in South China, told us: “No matter how capable a leader is, he or she alone won’t be able to deliver a large project or program without the joint efforts and synergies that come from the team.” Leaders *foster collaboration* and build trust by engaging all those who must make the project work. When people are trusted and have more discretion, more authority, and more information, they’re much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results.

Exemplary leaders also *strengthen others* so that constituents know they are capable of delivering on promises. They make constituents feel powerful and efficacious. Heidi Winkler, attorney-at-law with Pihl, a privately held construction company in Denmark, learned from her personal-best leadership experience “how much easier it is to achieve shared goals (or even make goals shared) when you involve people in the decisions to be made, trust them to handle the execution, and give them responsibilities and credit along the way.”

Encourage the Heart

In climbing to the top, people can become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted. They are often tempted to give up. Genuine acts of caring draw people forward. Exemplary leaders *recognize contributions* by showing appreciation for individual

excellence. The payoff is explained by Jason Cha, senior manufacturing engineer with Abbott Vascular: “This raises an individual’s commitment to excellence because his or her name is associated with a given project.”

Leaders also *celebrate the values and victories*. Celebrations and rituals, when done with authenticity and from the heart, build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through extraordinarily tough times.

Importance

These are the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership that emerged from extensive research on what people actually do when they are leading others to greatness. And our research clearly shows that engaging in these practices makes a profoundly positive difference in people’s commitment and performance at work.

To assess the impact leader behavior has on engagement and performance, we’ve correlated responses from nearly 2 million people around the world on the *Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)*—our 360-degree assessment instrument measuring how frequently leaders engage in the Five Practices—with work attitude and with demographic variables. These scales consist of 10 demographic questions ranging from age and gender to function, industry, and organizational size and another 10 questions about how respondents feel about their leaders and their workplaces.

The conclusion: Those leaders who more frequently use the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are considerably more effective than their counterparts who use them infrequently. Statistical analyses reveal that a leader’s behavior explains nearly 30% of constituents’ workplace engagement. Personal and organizational characteristics of constituents, on the other hand, explain less than 1% of constituents’ engagement in, commitment to, and pride in their workplaces. Workplace engagement and commitment is independent of who the constituents are (as related to factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, or education) and of their position, job, discipline, industry, nationality, or the country from which they come.

Many other scholars have documented how leaders who engage in the Five Practices are more effective than those who don’t, whether the context is inside or outside the United States, the public or

private sector, or within schools, health care organizations, business firms, prisons, churches, and the like. For example, leaders who use the Five Practices more frequently than their counterparts achieve the following:

- Create higher-performing teams
- Generate increased sales and customer satisfaction levels
- Foster renewed loyalty and greater organizational commitment
- Enhance motivation and the willingness to work hard
- More successfully represent their units to upper management
- Facilitate high patient-satisfaction scores and more effectively meet family member needs
- Promote high degrees of involvement in schools
- Enlarge the size of their religious congregations
- Increase fundraising results and expand gift-giving levels
- Extend the range of their agency’s services
- Reduce absenteeism, turnover, and dropout rates
- Positively influence recruitment rates

Over a 5-year period, the financial performance of organizations where senior leaders were identified by their constituents as strongly using the Five Practices was compared with those organizations whose leadership was significantly less engaged in the Five Practices. The bottom line? Net income growth was nearly 18 times higher and stock price growth nearly 3 times higher than their counterparts for those publicly traded organizations whose leadership strongly engaged in the Five Practices.

Although the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership don’t completely explain why leaders and their organizations are successful—no model in existence can account for 100% of leader effectiveness—it’s very clear that engaging in the Five Practices makes a positive difference no matter who you are or where you are located. How you behave as a leader matters, and it matters a lot.

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See also Authentic Leadership; Cultural Values; High-Performing Teams; Level 5 Leadership; Positive Organizational Scholarship; Transformational Theory of Leadership; Trust