

For: Strategic Finance

Am I a Leader?

By Robert Gunn

Am I a leader? In night's cocoon what leader has not asked himself this question?

Leading is an elusive, mysterious act. It comprises moments of truth when the leader asks others to entwine their fates for uncertain, unknowable destinies. I am not speaking about the intellectual process of leading – those familiar goings-on we know so well, such as making decisions, planning (sometimes plotting) alternatives, or taking actions. No, that is the daytime work. It uses all the power of your intellect and all the know-how of your experience. Good leaders systematically use this kind of intelligence, give it structure, and request others to follow its dictates.

But no first-rate leader can ever elicit great performance by just initiating or following established customs. Markets don't stand still. What worked so well yesterday, by tomorrow's daybreak is already showing signs of obsolescence. Great companies evolve, continuously and quickly; that is their common denominator. But this doesn't just happen; it takes talented leaders who provoke the evolution.

A leader must not be afraid of pointing to the unknown and asking others to follow – to that place where there are more questions than answers, where the path is untrodden, and where others say, that's never been done before.”

So much of a leader's work is with the unfamiliar, grappling with those intangible, uniquely human variables that sustain accomplishment through fair winds and foul. Perhaps no leaders, if they are truthful with themselves, can ever say with certainty, “Yes! I am a leader.” But some have the humility to realize that just by asking this question, they at least have a chance to experience moments of accomplished leadership.

It is the uncommon leader who embraces the intangibles by learning to make them his or her stock in trade. I am speaking of four intangibles in particular – tone, time, trust, and transfer, not that these are the exhaustive, complete list. But they are relevant because they point towards our inner capacity to direct, create, and respond to life by using capabilities we all possess – insight, common sense, and wisdom. These are the very same qualities that enable individuals to change, teams to break fresh ground, and organizations to sustain performance in good times and bad.

Tone

Graceful leaders tend to pay attention to what I call tone – that pitch of language or body movement that expresses meaning so eloquently. They pay attention to mood and body language by asking, “How am I feeling?” and “How are others feeling?” When their own mood is positive and lighthearted or when they see others express humor, well being, or warmth, they know that a great deal can be accomplished easily and quickly.

Conversely, if they wake up on the wrong side of bed or if a meeting turns dispirited, they know not to push themselves. People simply don’t do their best work when they are in a low mood – and while we all may take this statement for granted, leaders sometimes forget to act on it.

It is distressing to see a leader, at the end of what may have been a wonderfully productive meeting, suddenly ask a controversial question that throws everyone for a loop. All the good work is momentarily lost as risk, fear, anger, or worry cause people to become defensive and second-guess themselves. It is as if good feelings somehow threaten accomplishment.

Changing the tone is simple for leaders who recognize that all moods result from thinking expressing itself as feeling. For such leaders, low moods are nothing more than anxious, worried, distracted, or fearful thoughts. They know that they can lift their own mood by looking towards the positive – humor, love, kindness, compassion, gratitude, service, or forgiveness – and knowing that these kinds of thoughts will automatically lighten their feelings – and elevate the spirits and thinking of those around them.

Feelings are contagious. An engaged, warmhearted feeling may yield infectious enthusiasm and creative answers to problems. Skilled leaders look to feelings as the first order of any business. Warm, positive feelings

lead to great and lasting outcomes. Anxious, self-important thoughts lead to superficial gains, dearly purchased.

Time

Moments of inspired action come to accomplished leaders seemingly without conscious direction; they “merely see what needs to be done and then just do it.” When asked how this happens, they often talk about time slowing down, of seeing things with complete clarity. Sometimes they describe a sense of observing themselves, of being somewhat removed from their actions, as if they were both actor and observer.

They are able to gain clarity and perspective, not necessarily by having more knowledge or experience but rather by using that special way of perceiving that comes from being able to see the future as part of the present. In moments like these, their sense of “now” is not linear. In the same way that astronomers can see backwards in time using telescopes, these people reel in the future, not by counting the minutes or measuring the months but by acting as if the future were here in the present moment.

They know that, like formlessness, timelessness is a state of consciousness that transcends the measurement of time. Their faith in this higher form of consciousness enables them to trust that insight and intuition will be accessible to them when they most need it, to act as if the future were here right now, and to resist rushing into action until the purpose of that action is obvious.

For example, our company needs to expand in the Asia/Pacific region. We are starting from nothing. By thinking as if we are already “in business there”, people in the company are taking all kinds of actions, both large and small, that literally bring the vision to life now. There is no grand plan, scheme, master schedule, or list of to dos...we are merely allowing ourselves to see the obvious relying on our insight and common sense and then acting on it.

Think of the power we could unleash if we could systematically release ourselves from the perceptual shackles we place on our assumptions about time. If we see time as infinite, as it truly is, then we free ourselves from those obsessive desires to predict the future or those anxious preparations for

the unforeseeable. As leaders we then make decisions from a higher state of awareness about the nature of life and the truth of our existence.

Trust

Anyone who has ever been on a real team, one where the members transcend their egos and work towards a common goal, knows that trust is at the heart of all great teams. If the motto on the dollar is “In God we Trust,” then the motto of every team must be “In others I Trust.” That usually takes a pretty big leap of faith, at least at first.

We have been so conditioned to look out for Number One that giving of one’s time and talents to others is assumed to be a suckers’ game. This is ironic because anyone who has ever been on a team that reaches its dreams will say that they were willing to give their best effort without regard for personal recognition or reward. It is ironic because teams can accomplish so much, so easily that in the end the rewards almost inevitably come.

Skillful leaders build teams on trust, with a dash of respect. One of the most important ways they do this is by engendering feelings of connectedness – by having faith in others and by acting in such a way that teammates can rely on the leaders’ promises.

Feelings of goodwill connect people and establish the rapport that is so necessary for listening and communication. This warmth helps others think more clear-headedly because they are not wrapped up in their egos, worrying about how they look to others, angry that a suggestion was rejected, or distracted because they are busy and over-scheduled.

Delivering on your promises simply means saying what you mean and doing what you say. It’s not hard. The payoff is being able to maintain your sense of integrity with your teammates. And the consequence is that much more effort and attention are devoted to the task and much less to gossiping, spying, or worrying.

Leaders who insist that trust is something that must be earned or that a dose of healthy competition among team members is a good thing innocently sabotage accomplishment and interfere with tight group dynamics. Such leaders often generate feelings of rivalry or discouragement that lead to behaviors that work against collective accomplishment.

But leaders who freely give trust reap the benefits that come from the team's collective intelligence. Such faith in teamwork provides the kind of certainty that powers team accomplishment.

Transfer

Ultimately, the measure of a leader's success is the extent to which others grow in their own capacity to lead. Helping others express their talents as managers requires a shift in mental perception. We must re-orient our thinking from being primarily concerned about our own contributions, failures, or rewards to being predominantly focused on the personal growth of others.

Since accountability can never be delegated (the captain goes down with the ship), it takes a leap of faith to believe that others not only have the capacity to step up but also have the commitment to make whatever contribution is required. For the full authority to act must accompany delegation of responsibility. It is at this moment the leader's fate is in the hands of his or her subordinate for the ultimate accountability for the outcome always stays at the leader's desk.

This takes an inner certainty to know that what is being delegated is the right thing to do. It is more of a feeling that comes from a moment's reflection looking for the wisdom to "know".

This is where skillful leaders distinguish themselves for, like a good parent, they place the outcome squarely on their manager's shoulders while communicating the feeling of being utterly confident of his or her success. If you are a leader who is overwhelmed and overworked, that is often a clue that you may not be delegating with the utter conviction and authority that is necessary.

Effective delegation releases more constructive energy than anything else a leader can do. This is so obvious that it needs no proof. But it does require a willingness to acknowledge that possibilities exist beyond our own knowledge or experience. When leaders think hopeful thoughts, they release the creativity and contributions of others, who step forward with actions and decisions that often surpass the leader's expectations.

An Answer

Emerson said that life's most profound questions are never answered directly, for truth can never be proven, but only revealed in action. The question "Am I a leader?" is one of those – something discovered only by the process of living as if you actually are the leader you aspire to be.

By directing mental energy towards feelings of calmness, tranquility, lightheartedness, humility, integrity, faith, hope, and service, leaders are able to shape an environment where those they lead are able to sustain performance. For it is these kinds of thoughts that establish the tone so necessary for peak performance, the trust that underpins collaboration, the reflective time to perceive what is truly needed, and the transfer of responsibility to get the job done.

By keeping the question, "Am I a leader?" in mind, perhaps you will discover these truths for yourself the next time you awake in the heart of a very dark night.