



## **Leadership Assessment - Covering 23 Dimensions**

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There are hundreds of leadership assessments for leaders. The content and quality of these assessments vary greatly. You can spend a lot of time and money taking surveys to tell you the quality of your leadership. There are a few leading indicators that can be used to give a pretty good picture of the overall quality of your leadership. These are not good for diagnosing problems or specifying corrective action, but they can tell you where you stand quickly. Here are several of my favorite measures.

#### **#1 Know your “In Vs. Out Ratio”**

Are people striving to get into your organization or are they trying to find ways to get out? It is pretty easy to assess if people want to get in because you will have a long line of individuals contacting you to ask in what way they can join your group. Some people are very persistent, and it is a good sign when highly talented people ask you to keep looking for a spot for them.

The second measure is harder to assess because when people want to get out of your organization, it is not always obvious. The telltale sign is if individuals are “looking for other opportunities.” Usually a leader does not know what percentage of his or her population is trying to find alternate employment. That is because if lots of people want out, there is likely very little trust in the organization.

With low trust, people will hide the fact they are looking for a different job out of self protection. The best time to find a job is when you already have a job, so people can go years while looking around to find a better position. Likewise in an environment of low trust you might be afraid for your employment if your boss knew you were looking elsewhere.

It is obvious that when people are looking elsewhere, they are not giving 100% of their best to the current organization. If there are several people in this situation it can really sap productivity and morale.

So the yin and yang for a leader is that if trust is high, people will generally be wanting in and that information will be rather transparent due to the long line. If trust is low, the number of people wanting out is a hidden number.

My bottom line for all leaders is to ask if they know the ratio of people wanting to get in versus out. If they have a good idea, then they are good leaders. If they have no clue, it

reflects poorly on the quality of their leadership. It is a simple and remarkably accurate barometer.

## **#2 Level of Trust**

Good leaders create a legacy of trust within their organization. I have written elsewhere on the numerous hallmarks of an organization with trust as opposed to one that has no trust. But is there a quick and dirty kind of litmus test for trust? Think about how you would know if an organization has high trust.

You can do extensive surveys on the climate or call in an expensive consultant to study every nook and cranny of the organization, but that is not necessary. All you need to do is walk into a meeting that is going on and observe what you see for about 5 minutes. You can get a very accurate view of the level of trust in what Malcolm Gladwell calls a “thin slice” of a few minutes watching a group.

Look at how the people sit. Are they leaning back with arms crossed and rigid necks, or are they basically leaning either in or toward the other people next to them? Observe the look on the faces of people in the meeting. Can you see pain and agony, like they do not want to be there but are forced to endure the agony till the boss adjourns?

Listen to how people address each other. Is there a biting sarcasm that seeks to gain personal advantage by making other people in the room look small or do the people show genuine respect and even affection for each other?

See how individuals interact with the leader. Is it obvious that everyone is trying to help the leader or are they trying to trip him up or catch him in a mistake? Do the participants show a genuine respect for the leader?

Is there a willingness to speak up if there is something not sitting right – for anyone, or is there a cold atmosphere of fear where people know they will get clobbered if they contradict the leader?

If there is work to be done are there eager volunteers or does everyone sit quiet like non bidders at an auction?

Is the spirit of the meeting one of doom and gloom or is the group feeling like masters of their own fate, even when times are rough?

These are just a few signs you can observe in only a few minutes that will tell you the level of trust within the group. That trust level is an accurate reflection of the caliber of the leader. I used to tell people that I could tell the climate of an organization within 30 seconds of watching a meeting. You can actually see it in the color of the air.

## **#3 Growth & Development**

Good leaders focus on the growth and development of people. If you want to test the caliber of a leader, just measure how much energy she spends on developing people. The concept is that there is vast reservoir of talent in all people that is ripe for development.

I estimate that most organizations typically get around 20% of the available energy and talent of their workforce. My estimate may be a bit off, but not too far. Think of this. It would mean that we can triple the productivity of the workforce and still have people working at roughly 60% of their capacity. Wow, what a great way to improve output and lower costs. Of course you cannot get 100% of the energy of all people all of the time. That would require so much adrenalin it would kill everyone. But we really don't need the 100%. I contend there is so much pent up potential in most organizations the upside is seemingly infinite.

What holds us back? Well, it is a lot of factors I am describing in this series. One of the key ones is whether people have been given the skills to do their best work. Good leaders know this and put a lot of emphasis in the development of people.

You can contrast this with poor leaders who do not seek to do much development. They may be afraid that if they develop outstanding raw talent they will surpass the leader and leave him in the dust. They may be too ignorant to realize that 1 our in a good training program brings more than 3 incremental hours of productivity to the organization. It may be that the organization is in such a state of panic, there is simply no time to develop people for the future. This myopic viewpoint is similar to the orchestra playing their final tunes on the Titanic.

Another aspect of development is the degree to which the leader seeks to grow as an individual. Does she have discussion groups around some leadership books? Is she enrolled in several professional organizations? Does she spend time going to at least one professional conference per year? Does she listen to recorded programs while driving? Does she have an active reading list? All of these are signs of a person who is really interested in growing as a leader. When you see these signs, you know the person understands the value of continuous learning. If they are absent, even if for good and valid reasons, it shows a lack of interest in development, which is a sign of a weak leader.

#### **#4 Lack of Fear**

Good leaders create an environment where there is less fear. That does not mean there is never any fear within the organization. Sometimes scary stuff is needed in order for the organization to survive. But in those times of uncertainty, great leaders redouble their communication activities to keep people aware of what is going on.

In draconian times, it is the lack of solid reliable information that causes the most fear. When leaders are as transparent as possible, it leads to open communication. This means lower fear, and higher trust, even when things are not pleasant.

Nature hates a vacuum. If you have a bare spot in your lawn, nature will quickly fill it in with something, usually weeds. If you take a bucket of water out of a pond, nature will fill in the “hole” immediately. When you open a can of coffee, you hear the rush of air coming in to replace the vacuum. So it is with people, if there is a void of information, people will find something to fill in the void – usually weeds.

That is why rumors attenuate in a culture of high trust. There is no fuel to keep the fires of gossip going. Leaders keep people informed of what is going on all the time. This helps people vent their fears and focus on the tasks at hand even if they are involved with unpleasant things.

## **#5 How People Treat Each Other**

You can tell the caliber of a leader instantly when you view how people in the organization treat each other. A good leader insists on constructive and helpful behaviors that model high trust and even affection.

Some people believe the word affection is too strong for the working world. I disagree. Groups that work for a great leader learn to really appreciate each other for their good qualities. That does not mean that everyone always gets along with no quarrels; that would be a phony environment. Just like a family, people will eventually find some things to cause friction, but there is sincere affection behind any tension that shows through as people work to resolve differences without doing emotional damage.

Where leadership is weak, squabbles between people lead to childish behaviors that can cause permanent damage to relationships. It is easy to witness this in most organizations. As Lou Holtz observed, “you can find a thousand things to not like about somebody but you need to look for the things that you do like, that support the team effort.” In an environment of support and affection it is easy to become a close knit team that is hard to beat.

Good leaders insist that their group generates a set of specific behaviors. It is important to be able to point at these things and call each other when the behaviors are not being modeled. The leader always works to model the behaviors and actually verbalizes them frequently. It may sound like this, “Thanks for your comment Frank, I appreciate how your words supported Mary’s effort because that is a value and behavior we cherish in our team.”

Watch for the signs of a group that, while there are differences, handle those disconnects in a mature and loving way. A group like that is being guided by an excellent leader.

## **#6 Builds an Inclusive Culture**

Organizations where people at all levels feel a part of the action and are appreciated for the diversity of talent they bring to the organization are run by enlightened leaders. You

can observe the leader going out of her way to include as many people as possible in discussions about issues and decisions in the organization.

Less talented leaders surround themselves with a clique of insiders who guide the fate of the rest of the organization. I visualize a shell around the anointed people on the inner circle. It is hard to communicate through the shell, and people who try to penetrate it are repelled and scorned.

If you have a leader who operates from a small command and control type style, you can see the bunker mentality in most activities. This exclusivity leads to lower empowerment throughout the organization. It may feel like an efficient way to make decisions to have an inner circle, but it leaves so much useful muscle and energy off the table.

To be a winning organization, all of the talents of everyone are required fully aligned behind the vision of the organization. Good leaders know this and instinctively get people involved as much as possible. Oh sure, there are occasions when it is necessary to operate behind closed doors while decisions are being cast. That is no reason for the normal daily routine to mimic the College of Cardinals who have to send a smoke signal out to the masses when their deliberations are over. Most activities can be visible, transparent, and inclusive of the general population. In return, people will give their best to accomplish the goals of the organization.

## **#7 Connects Well with People**

A good way to evaluate the quality of a leader is to watch the way he connects with people both upward and downward. Great leaders are known for being real rather than phony. People describe the great ones as being “a nice guy” or “approachable” or “like a friend.” The idea is the leader does not act aloof and talk down to people. There is no pedestal separating the leader from people in the organization.

There are numerous ways a leader can demonstrate the genuine connection with people. For example, John Chambers, CEO of Cisco works from a 12X12 foot cubicle and answers his own phone. There is no executive washroom and no corporate plane. Other leaders dress more like the workers in jeans and polo shirt rather than suit and tie. Probably the most helpful way to be connected to people is to walk the deck often. There is a way you can tell if you are getting enough face time with people.

When you approach a group of workers on the shop floor, watch their body language. If they stiffen up and change their posture, you know that your visit is too much of a special event. If the group continues with the same body language, but just welcomes you into the conversation, then you are doing enough walking of the deck. They used to call this habit MBWA – short for Management By Walking Around. It is, by far, the most enjoyable and easiest way to stay connected with people.

Likewise, the great leader knows how to stay connected with the people above him. In this case MBWA does not work too well because there is no real “shop floor” for upper

management. Being accessible helps, so know the layout and drop by on occasion to check in. Do not be a pest – there is a fine line.

One suggestion is to experiment with the preferred modes of communication of your superiors. For example I can recall the best way to keep in touch with one of my bosses was through voice mail. Another boss would rarely reply to voice mail or e-mail, so I would make sure to stop by to see her physically.

One tip that was helpful to me was to arrive very early in the morning – before any of the bosses were present. Most executives arrive at work before the general population to prepare for the day and get some quiet work done before the masses arrive. I would always be in my office working when the boss arrived. There were many occasions when something had to be done to help the boss very early in the morning. Since I was the only one around, I had the opportunity to do little favors for the boss to help her out. Over time that builds up a kind of bond.

Beating the boss in to work consistently demonstrates a kind of dedication. The boss has no way of knowing when you arrived. You could have gotten there just 5 minutes before her or already been hard at work for an hour. I always enjoyed having my car make the first set of tracks in the snow of the manager’s parking lot. Over time, that built up a helpful reputation for me that paid off.

## **#8 Firm but Fair**

Great leaders know how to navigate the minefield of being compassionate but have a sense of discipline within the organization. It really is a delicate balance. You need to make accommodations in some circumstances and draw a firm line on others.

We have all seen leaders who are too eager to please. They bend over backwards to be accommodating to the outside needs of people in the organization. In return, people take advantage of the leader and make more requests for special consideration. Also, since people can observe the concessions made by the leader with other people, a sense of equity demands that when a similar situation comes up the same concession is extended to others. Before long, the leader has lost all sense of control. In a desperate attempt to regain order, the leader tries to draw lines on the sand. This is annoying to people who have become accustomed to a more lax interpretation of the rules. So, being too accommodating is dangerous.

On the flip side, going too much “by the book” gains one a reputation for being a hard ass. That reputation limits the amount of discretionary effort people are willing to expend. If a leader shows little compassion for the typical tight spots people find themselves in, he becomes an ogre that demands respect through command and control. Scrooge, before his transformation, was a good example of this kind of leader.

Neither of these extremes is desirable. The “sweet spot” is to have a reputation for being firm with application of the rules, but compassionate as well and willing to be flexible in extreme cases. Also, be cognizant of the need for fairness. This implies putting a damper on the issue of playing favorites. I have written elsewhere on the issue of favorites.

Briefly, we need to recognize that we cannot avoid having favorites within any population. We are human beings. What the great leader does is show in many ways that, even though there are favorites, he does not “play favorites.” To avoid this, the leader tries to treat each person as a favorite and operates outside his comfort zone for some small percentage of the time.

One obvious thing that some leaders miss is that being firm implies having standards. Neither of the extremes in this dimension is advisable. On the one hand, you can have a burdensome employee manual with thousands of rules that people find hard to remember. If you find yourself “hiding behind” the employee manual when making decisions on personal requests, you may be in danger of over doing the bureaucratic mumbo jumbo. On the other extreme is the office where there are no formal rules, and we just try to always do what is right. That is a slippery slope because without some form of standards people don’t know what to expect.

The optimum position is to have a crisp and concise set of expectations, and everyone should know they are enforced. People should also be aware that there are emergency situations where a rule can be waived, but those situations are rare. Knowing when to grant an exception is what puts the art in leadership. In general it is best to lean toward the formal side.

## **#9 Admits Mistakes**

All leaders make mistakes. Few leaders relish the opportunity to publicly admit them. I think that is wrong thinking. For many types of mistakes a public “*mia culpa*” is a huge deposit in the trust account. Sure, there are types of mistakes that should not be flaunted before the general population. For example, if a mistake is similar to one that a leader has made several times in the past, it is not a good idea to stand up in front of a group and say, “well folks, I did it again.” Likewise if a mistake is such a bonehead move it brings into question the sanity of a leader, it is not a good idea to admit it. But barring those kinds of issues, if an honest mistake was made, getting up and admitting it, apologizing, and asking for forgiveness is cathartic.

I once had the opportunity to call people together and admit a mistake I had made in a budget meeting the previous day. People were not happy to hear the news that I inadvertently gave away \$10K, but I did have a steady stream of people come to my office later to tell me my apology was accepted and that my little speech hit a home run on the shop floor. Reason: people do not expect leaders to apologize because it is almost never done. You catch people off guard when you do it, and it has a major impact on trust.

Apologizing upward is another tricky area that can have a profound impact. The same caveats for apologizing downward apply here; if a mistake was plain stupid or it is the same one you have made before, best not admit it to the boss unless some serious damage would result. But if you have made an honest mistake, admitting this to the boss can be a big trust builder. This is especially true if the boss would never know unless you told him.

I recall a situation in my career where I had inadvertently divulged some company information while on a business trip in Japan. Nobody in my company would ever know I had slipped in my department, but it bothered me. I took some special action to mitigate the mistake and went hat in hand to my boss. I said, “Dick, I need to talk to you. I made a mistake when I was in Japan last week. You would never know this unless I told you, but here is what happened...” I then described how I let a magazine be copied where I had written some notes in the margin. I described how I retrieved the copy and was given assurances that other copies had not been made. My boss said “Well, Bob, you are right, that is not the smartest thing you ever did, but thanks for letting me know about it, and I forgive you.”

That short meeting with my boss increased his trust in me substantially, and I received several promotions over the next few years that I can trace to his confidence in me. Granted, his confidence was influenced by numerous good things I had done, but by admitting something that I did not need to do, the relationship was strengthened rather than weakened. This is powerful stuff, but it must be used in the right way at the right time for the right reason.

After making a mistake most leaders try to hide it, downplay the importance, blame others, or use some other method to try to weasel out of it. Often these actions serve to lower trust. Consider taking the opportunity to apologize publicly, Often it is a great way to build trust. Use this technique carefully and infrequently, and it can be a positive influence on the quality of your leadership.

## **# 10 Lead by Example**

Leading by example sounds like a simple concept, yet many leaders struggle to do it in day to day operations. Reason: it is easy to fall into a trap of “do as I say, not as I do.” Of course, this is a deadly sin for any leader. Most leaders would deny having a problem in this area, yet many of them really do not see how they are compromising their position. Here is an extreme example to illustrate.

I once knew a plant manager who was world class at this. He would rant and rave about following the “do not walk outside the barrier” signs when construction was happening in the plant. He wanted managers to consider firing any employee caught crossing a barrier. Yet, I saw him coming to work one day and park in his special spot next the building. He then stepped over a safety cone and chain to get to the door of the building. He was aware of the fact that no work was going on at the time and was in a rush, but he was unaware that anybody saw his transgression.



This same manager insisted in having a shutdown and review any time there was a safety incident within the plant. That was laudable. During one such inspection following a safety incident, he was standing in the production area twirling the safety glasses we had given him around next to his face. I politely told him to please put on his safety glasses.

A third incident with this leader that really fried my bacon was when we had a rather serious incident that could have caused a fatality. I ordered the operation shut down and a full investigation. This was a large conveyor system for heavy materials that needed to be operated in complete darkness because the product being moved was photographic movie film. One of the interlocks to keep product separated had failed and an operator went in to clear a jam. He successfully cleared the jam but nearly got crushed by the incoming product afterward. They reviewed the accident report with me and indicated they were ready to start up again. I asked how they could guarantee the same problem would not happen again in the future. Not receiving a suitable answer, I ordered a complete stand down of the operation and further fail safe measures. This was not popular with the employees who figured they could just be more careful.

After wrestling with the issues for a full day, the operations and maintenance personnel came up with a solution that really would guarantee the problem never happened again. I called a special meeting with the production people and the Plant Manager to go over the problem and the resolution. We had the meeting, but the Plant Manager never showed up, even though his administration person said he was available at that time. What an awful signal to send the troops.

After I wrote a blistering e-mail, I was on his blackball list for the rest of the time until he was fired by upper management for insubordination and lying.

The point of these examples is that people really do notice what leaders do. When they say one thing and then do something more expedient, there is no way to command respect. It should be grounds for termination of any manager. But lowly employees do not have the power to actually fire their leader, so they just do it mentally and write him off as a lost cause. By the way, if you asked this Plant Manager if he has ever sent mixed signals on safety, he would deny it. He was honestly unaware of his stupid actions as is the case with most managers who are duplicitous.

Beyond these obvious atrocities, there are positive things leaders can do. When you go out of your own comfort zone to do something positive, people notice that as well. If a leader cuts her vacation short by 2 days in order to support an important plant tour with a new customer, that really registers with people. If a manager goes out and buys a gift certificate with his own money to thank an employee who went way beyond the expected performance, word of it gets around. When a manager helps clean up a conference room after a long meeting, it sends a signal.

These ideas are not rocket science, yet many managers fail at this basic stuff. You need to seek out ways to go above and beyond what people expect of you and never, ever violate a rule you expect others to follow.

## **#11 Demonstrate Integrity**

Lou Holtz, the famous football coach had a remarkably simple philosophy of doing business. It consisted of three simple little rules: 1) Do Right, 2) Do the best you can, and 3) Treat other people like you would like to be treated. The basic Do Right Rule means acting with integrity. If doing what is right is such a basic and easy thing, why am I even bothering to write about it? It's simple. Most leaders have a hard time figuring out what the right thing is. That is a stunning indictment to make, but I really believe it is true. Reason: in the melee of everyday challenges, it is so easy to make a judgment that seems right under the circumstances, but when extrapolated to its logical conclusion it is really not ethical, or moral, or it is just plain dumb.

I believe that most of the huge organizational scandals of the last decade started out as subtle value judgments by leaders in their organizations. There was a decision point where they could have taken path A or path B. While path B was "squeaky clean" in terms of the ethics involved, path A was also perfectly logical and acceptable based on the rules in place at the time and was also somewhat more profitable than Path B. The problem is that if path A was acceptable today, then A+ would be fine the next day, and A++ the next. Other people would get involved, and the practice would get more embedded into the culture. Eventually, after a few years, it was clear that rules were being bent all over the place in order for the organization to look good to investors. There was no convenient way to roll back the ethical clock, nor was there any impetus.

Ultimately the practice, whether it was Enron's disappearing assets or Bernie Madoff's Ponzi Scheme, became too big to hide and things blew up. My contention is that these people were not intending to do bad things originally, they just got caught up in what Alan Greenspan called irrational exuberance and had no way to quit the abuse. Of course, by that time they really were evil people doing evil things, but I believe it did not start out with those intentions. At the start I believe these leaders were truly blind to the origin of corruption that brought down their empires and bankrupt thousands of individuals in the process.

How can leaders protect themselves from getting caught up in a web of deception if they were originally blind to the problem? It's simple, they needed to create a culture of transparency and trust whereby being whistle blower was considered good. Imagine if the culture in an organization was such that when someone (anyone) in the company was concerned about the ethics of current practice and he or she brought that concern to light, there would have been a reward rather than punishment. To accomplish this, leaders need to reinforce candor, in every phase of operations. It has to be a recognized policy that seeing something amiss brings with it an obligation to speak up, but that is OK because speaking up will bring rewards.

The concept of rewarding candor creates opportunities for leaders to see things that would otherwise be hidden and take corrective action before the tsunami gets started. It also allows leaders to be fallible human beings and make mistakes without having them become a reason for them to spend the rest of their life in jail.

So here is a good test of your leadership ability. How transparent is your organization? Do you truly reward employees when they bring up things that do not seem right to them or are they put down and punished.

## **#12 Listen Deeply**

It is said that managers have the worst hearing in the world. Many employees lament that trying to talk to the boss is like trying to reason with a rock. Yet most managers would put “listening skills” as one of their best traits. How come there is such a wide gap between perception and reality? I believe leaders do not understand that listening is a very complicated and multi-step process that starts in the mind of the speaker. Here are the steps.

1. Speaker’s mind has a thought
2. Speaker translates the thought into words
3. Speaker says the words
4. Words are conveyed to the ear of the listener
5. Words are heard or not heard as sent
6. The words that were heard are translated into thought
7. The thought is translated into the listener’s mind

If any one of those seven elements is corrupted in any way, then the message has not been received accurately. Of those seven steps, which one causes the most trouble in communication? It is step 5. Reason: While most people are “listening” they are actually occupying their mind preparing to speak. So what actually enters the ear is not what the listener actually believes has been said. The culprit here is that we have a disconnect between how fast we can talk versus how fast we can think. We can think many times faster than we can talk, so the brain has excess time to process other things while waiting for the words to arrive. We actually multi-task, and our thoughts zoom in and out of the stream of words heading toward our ears. We believe that we have caught all of the content, but in reality only grasp part of it because we are occupied thinking up our response.

The best defense for poor listening habits is what is called “reflective listening” or sometimes called “active listening.” This is where we force our brain to slow down and focus on the incoming words in order to give the speaker visual and verbal cues that we really understood the message. The art of reflective listening is an acquired skill, and it takes a lot of practice and effort to be good at it. If you doubt that, just try listening to someone for 5 minutes straight and concentrate on absorbing every word such that you can reflect small parts of the conversation throughout the 5 minutes. It is exhausting.

For leaders, the need for listening is even more of a challenge. We have to not only hear and interpret the words, we have to understand the full meaning. This means not only must we take in the verbal input but also properly interpret the vast amount of body language that comes along with it. Since there is more meaning in body language than in words, it makes listening an even more daunting task.

Most leaders do not take the time and energy to internalize what is being conveyed to them because they are so preoccupied with getting their message out to others. This leaves them totally vulnerable to misunderstandings that cripple the ability to build trust. When you add the ego response which most leaders have an ample supply of, it is no wonder employees feel they are not being heard. James O'Toole had a great line for this in the book Transparency. He said, **"...it is often the presence of excessive amounts of testosterone that leads to a loss of hearing."**

### #13 Negotiate Well

All leaders exist in a kind of sandwich. They report to someone at a higher level and also supervise other people at lower levels in the organization. Great leaders are experts at negotiating the needs of both groups. They interpret the needs of the organization from above to the people below in a way that makes most of them understand and appreciate the policies of the larger group. Simultaneously great leaders advocate well for the needs of individuals reporting to them to levels above in the organization. It is this give and take role that requires constant attention and skill at negotiating well.

Effective negotiating is a science. You can take graduate level courses on this topic or there are numerous books and seminars outlining the various stratagems. You can study the tactics and countermeasures for months and still not be very skilled at negotiating well. The most important ingredient for effective negotiating within an organization is credibility. Leaders who are believable to their people and to upper management have more success at negotiating needs in both directions effectively.

So, how does a leader become credible? Here are some tips that can help. (I apologize in advance for all the clichés in this list. I decided that using the vernacular is the best way to convey this information succinctly.)

1. **Be consistent** – people need to know what you stand for, and you need to communicate your own values clearly.
2. **Show respect for opinions contrary to yours** – other opinions are as valid as yours, and you can frequently find a common middle ground for win-win solutions. This avoids unnecessary acrimony.
3. **Shoot straight** –speak your truth plainly and without a lot of spin. Get a reputation for telling the unvarnished truth, but do it with compassion. Do not try to snow people – people at all levels have the ability to smell BS very quickly.
4. **Listen more than you talk** – keep that ratio as much as possible because you are not the fountain of all knowledge. You just might learn something important.

5. **Be open and transparent** – share as much information as you can as early as possible.
6. **Get your facts right** – don't get emotional and bring in a lot of half truths to the argument.
7. **Don't be fooled by the vocal minority** – make sure you test to find out if what you are hearing is really shared broadly. Often there are one or two individuals who like to speak for the whole group, and yet they do not share the sentiments of everyone.
8. **Don't panic** – there are “Chicken Littles” who go around shouting “The sky is falling” every day. It gets tiresome, and people tune you out eventually.
9. **Ask a lot of questions** – Socratic and hypothetical questions are more effective methods of negotiating points than making absolute statements of your position.
10. **Admit when you are wrong** – sometimes you will be.
11. **Know when to back off** – pressing a losing point to the point of exhaustion is not a good strategy.
12. **Give other people the most credit** – often the smart thing to do is not claim victory even if you are victorious.
13. **Keep your powder dry for future encounters** – there is rarely a final battle in organizations, so don't burn bridges behind you.
14. **Smile** – be gracious and courteous always. If you act like a friend, it is hard for people to view you as an enemy.

These are some of the rules to build credibility. If you are familiar with these and practice them regularly, you are probably very effective at negotiating within your organization. Once you are highly credible, the tactics and countermeasures of conventional negotiating are more effective.

#### # 14 Emulate Level 5 Leaders

Jim Collins and his staff of MBA researchers did the business world a huge favor when they wrote the book *Good to Great*. I consider that book one of the best business books of the past decade. In looking at why some organizations consistently outperform others, the team came up with a model containing many new concepts. None of them were totally unheard of before, but the model packaged the concepts in a coherent process oriented thesis that is most helpful. In case you have not read this book, I recommend it to be purchased, read, dog-eared, and put into active practice – not on the shelf.

The concept of level 5 leadership is one of the core elements in the book. Collins found that all of the organizations that met his rigorous standard for excellence at that time were headed up by exceptional leaders. It is interesting that after studying hundreds of variables about what make these leaders so effective, they were able to boil them down to two common denominators. These were 1) a passion for the work, and 2) humility.

Level 5 Leaders are fanatically driven to produce results, and they produce consistently superior results. Self-effacing and modest, these leaders are workers rather than showoffs. They are more plow horse than show horse.

An example of Level 5 Leaders in action is the window/mirror analogy. Level 5 Leaders look out the window and attribute success to factors other than themselves. When things go poorly, however, they see the window as a mirror and blame themselves, taking full responsibility. In comparison, many CEOs, not Level 5 Leaders, often did just the opposite – they looked in the mirror taking credit for success, but looked out the window assigning blame for disappointing results to others.

I believe there are very few level 5 leaders in the world today. If you happen to know someone you can put up to that standard you are truly lucky. Study that person and see if you can get him or her as a mentor. It will improve your rate of progress as a leader by 2-3 times your current rate. If you do not know of anyone who rises to that standard, the best you can do is read some of the biographies of leaders outlined in *Good to Great*. It will give you some specific habits of these outstanding leaders.

### **#15 Make Good Decisions**

This measure sounds so trivial and axiomatic that you probably wonder why I list it at all. Unfortunately, many would-be great leaders make rather stupid decisions for one reason or another. I often puzzle at how it is possible for a leader to do something that takes him in exactly the opposite direction he is trying to go. That sounds illogical, I know, so let's examine some of the forces that could allow this to happen.

1. **Stupidity** – This is a simple situation of making a bonehead decision. It is like the leader who intellectually knows it is better to admit a mistake than to hide it because that actually increases respect, but chooses to hide it anyway. Sad to say there are many stupid leaders out there who make wrong decisions rather consistently.
2. **Too pressed for time** – I had a teacher once tell me “You can write a term paper in 3 months or 3 hours, the only difference is the quality.” So it goes with decisions. Quality goes up with more thought, at least up to a point. After a while the old syndrome of analysis paralysis takes over, and the decision process becomes entirely too cumbersome.
3. **Poor information from underlings** – often decisions are based on input from others. If a leader blindly takes bad information and makes big decisions based on it, they will turn out bad. That was the problem when George Bush decided to invade Iraq to get rid of the weapons of mass destruction. After sifting the sand of that entire country for years, we never did find the problem we allegedly went in to eliminate.
4. **Going along with bad advice from above** – there are times when your boss will toss out a half-baked idea and say “Why don't you try it.” Be careful to get good reasoned advice before taking the plunge.
5. **Not accounting for risk** – Every decision has an element of risk. If you make a decision based on optimism and faith but do not consider the potential downsides of it, you will eventually get caught in a nasty situation. Get the facts and consider what could go wrong as part of your planning process.

6. **Sub-optimizing on only part of the story** – it is really easy to please one constituency while alienating another one. You can please the shareholders by eliminating salary increases for a year, but the employees will suffer. There are numerous situations where there are tradeoffs. Go in with your eyes wide open on the holistic impact of your decisions on everyone.
7. **Not thinking of the customer** – for every action or decision, there is a customer. Make sure you know who the customer is and that the customer is well served by your decision.
8. **Repeat of something that did not work before** – Making the same bonehead move you have made in the past hoping for a better result should qualify you for a white jacket with very long sleeves. It is the classic definition of insanity.
9. **Distracted by a bigger issue** – often there are numerous decision processes going on simultaneously. You need to consider each one carefully and not put so much energy into one decision that you starve another. There is no forgiveness if you make a bad decision on the cart because you were focused on the horse.
10. **Hubris** – Decisions made to feed the ego can often lead to disastrous consequences. Try to not get married to your ideas too early. Think carefully about the full consequences before becoming an advocate of one approach.
11. **Lack of communication** – If you make a brilliant decision, but everyone else thinks it is stupid because you failed to explain your rationale, you are in trouble. You need to bring others into the process as early and completely as you can.

So, on first blush, the notion of making good decisions sounded trivial, but after considering some of the ways leaders get tripped up, the above checklist ought to be a good starter kit for a master list in your organization of how to make better decisions. I am sure there are several things I missed on my list that you can think of.

## # 16 Build a Reinforcing Culture

Leaders who are good at reinforcing others well end up gaining substantial leverage. Simply put, people tend to perform better if they feel appreciated. Since the days of Pavlov, we know that conditioning leads to improved actions, so this is no surprise. Unfortunately many leaders do not know or appreciate that reinforcement is a minefield. There are numerous ways to reinforce poorly. I have outlined these in my books and in other articles. Four categories of poor reinforcement are:

- Reinforcing with trivial trinkets to extreme
- Not being sincere with reinforcement
- Having timing and method not feel reinforcing to the receiver
- Applying reinforcement that is perceived biased and inequitable

For this article I want to focus on the culture rather than just the reinforcement habits of the leader. It is one thing to avoid the pitfalls above as a single person. That action will have leverage, but it will not change the whole organization nearly as much as if the leader encourages everyone in the organization to become good at reinforcing. What are some tips to allow this to happen?

**Model good reinforcement yourself** – always take the opportunity to make people feel good when they do good things. Do not rely on trivial gifts like t-shirts and pencils. Use a variety of techniques and use simple verbal or written praise for most of this work.

**Talk about the technology and the pitfalls** – discuss successes and failures openly. If an attempt at reinforcement backfires, hold a meeting to debrief what went wrong, how it can be corrected, and how it can be prevented in the future.

**Reinforce people when they reinforce others** – I know that reads like double talk or circular logic. The idea is that the leader needs to enhance the good feelings that people in the organization get when they take the time to say or write “thank you” to other people in the group. I would always get back to someone who wrote a thank you note to a co-worker thanking her for the help or whatever. The essence of my note was to make the originator feel great about taking the time to recognize the good deeds of another person.

## **#17 Optimize communication**

All of us communicate all of the time. When you add the body language to what we say, there is a steady stream of communication all day, every day. So why does communication always surface in the top 2 of every employee satisfaction survey as the most significant problem facing an organization? The sad fact is that most leaders are not that good at communicating, even though they work very hard at it. Let’s first look at the symptom from two vantage points.

The leader feels nearly overwhelmed with the need to communicate. In fact, the leader is communicating from the moment she logs on in the morning until she turns out the light exhausted at the end of the day. All work is a steady stream of explaining what is happening, reinforcing good work, explaining how poor attitudes are not helping, discussing the new product roll out, etc. So it is a frustration when people feedback that there is “never any communication” going on. Wow, what a slap in the face.

From the worker’s perspective, the signals that are coming through are not consistent and often incomprehensible. They long for information in a format and frequency that computes to them. The messages heard are not consistent with the messages sent by the leader. There are frequent surprises where a vacuum in communication is followed by a “gotcha” announcement.

The battle for excellent communication rages every day in every organization. Let’s take a look at some of the root causes of poor downward communication to uncover some opportunities for improvement.

1. **Frequency** – the span between communication on key issues is more tricky than meets the eye. The old rule of “the more the merrier” is really not the best policy. When you constantly say the same message in the same format, eventually people



- tune it out and you might better not have said anything because nobody is listening anymore. Yet, the other extreme is worse, if your touch points are so infrequent that people have forgotten the context of the message, then they will listen and hear, but not understand. So what is the antidote? How do leaders find the sweet spot? You need to let feedback from people be the volume control on your outgoing communication. Most of this feedback comes in body language – often in group settings.
2. **Boring Message** – I have seen really good leaders who tend to drone on in a monotone style that puts everybody to sleep. So, all the information is given, but everyone is zzzzd out, so there is poor communication. The best way to avoid this is to watch for the MEGO effect (short for My Eyes Glaze Over). When people get that look, you need to stop and ask a question. Get the audience back with you. Change the cadence, even use 5 seconds of silence to get the group conscious again. Get people up on their feet or engaged in a question for discussion among small groups. The energy needs to be on a conscious level for people to grasp meaning. I know the CEO of an organization that communicates with a deck of 50-100 PowerPoint slides. After the third slide, everybody in the audience is politely staring at the screen with the facial appearance of listening when in reality they are absorbing none of the information. The antidote here is to get the CEO some basic training on PowerPoint no-no's and make sure he doesn't sleep through the class.
  3. **Not what I said** - Some people hear what they think you are going to say, even if you say something else. Their predisposition leaves them incapable of absorbing the actual words and meaning. It reminds me of the old Archie Bunker quote, when he says to his wife, Edith, "The reason you don't understand me, is because I'm talking in English and you're listening in Dingbat!" During any presentation, test with your audience if you are getting through the fog.
  4. **Too complex** – In an effort to be complete with communications, many leaders are their own worst enemy. People can only absorb and internalize so much information at one time. Exactly how the information is conveyed has a lot to do with how much can be presented at any one time. Make sure each communication effort has only two or three key points and these are repeated at least three times in the presentation. Test afterward if people really understood those three key points. Use illustrations when possible and consider the different learning styles of your audience.
  5. **Management Speak** – Leaders often talk in a kind of language I call “management speak.” They need to understand that the average shop floor person does not relate to ROI or references to Maslow. Make sure your communication is on a level where people can readily grasp the message. However, be very careful to not “talk down” to people on the shop floor. They are not dumb; in fact they are incredibly smart. They just use different words, and you need to use their language as much as possible when communicating messages to them. Resist the temptation to “dumb down the message” so they can understand. Instead think of using the right language. Just because they do not know Latin is no reason to treat them as ignorant.

6. **Shifting messages** – It is not a static world, so a valid message on Wednesday may be the wrong one on Friday. The problem here is that leaders are cognizant of what transpired as the current message morphed into something different. Unfortunately, the shop floor people are not up to speed on the shifting sands. All they experience is a confusing message that is not consistent. Actually, this problem is more pervasive than leaders recognize, and it is a key reason why there is such a disconnect. The antidote is for leaders to be extremely cognizant of any small change in the message over time. Make sure you bring people up to speed on the background for the change if you want them to grasp the true meaning.
7. **Electronic Communication** – Leaders have shifted to a much higher percentage of communication via online means. It is not in the scope of this short article to go over all of the gremlins in this mode of communication. It took me 300 pages in a book to describe how leaders fail to navigate the minefield of successful online communication. Suffice to say this is an area of great peril. Unfortunately, most leaders think there is little difference between communicating face to face versus online. There is a huge difference (I outline 8 major differences in my book). An example may help here. Most people view an e-mail like a conversation. You have information coming in, you process it, and then send information out. Just a conversation, right? Wrong! When we talk to people face to face, we are constantly modifying the message, cadence, body language, and the words based on the real-time feedback we are getting. Online, there is no feedback while the message is being sent. It is all blind, and we have no way to correct things if we are off track. Thinking of online communication like a conversation is extremely dangerous.
8. **Communicating at the head level** - Good communication does not occur at the “head” level. Sure, we use the mouth to speak, the ears to hear, the brain to interpret, the eyes to see, etc. Real communication is deep in the gut. When you have internalized the message fully, it goes well into the body. Don't make the mistake of thinking you have communicated with someone because you have talked and they appear to have heard it. Verify what was taken in at the gut level.

Those are just 8 ways of improving communication. Actually there are hundreds of them, this article only scratches the surface. But, if you focus on these few important considerations, you can really improve your communications with people.

## **#18 Handle Crises**

One easy way to measure the caliber of a leader is to observe him in a crisis. Great leaders take command, but do so in a special way that weaker leaders try unsuccessfully to emulate. In the first place they have the ability to diffuse internal crises and avoiding a kind of mob scene where workers gang up on the leader.

The distinction begins even before the crisis is evident. It is a mindset. Average leaders take rest when things are going smoothly. They focus on the little fires and beat them down so they do not spread. Other than that, “if it ain't broke, don't fix it” is the

mentality. We might as well enjoy the way things are going since it is smooth sailing. By contrast, the great leader sees the world as a series of calm times and storms, some of them hurricanes. The calm times are opportunities to sharpen our skills and reactions for the next storm. For sure, it will come, so we ought to be looking at our past successes or failures in prior storms to get ready for the next one.

In business, the nature or timing of the next storm is far less predictable than in nature. For example, in late summer, we can expect several hurricanes to crop up in the Atlantic and work their way toward the mainland U.S.. Once they form, computer models can predict with various levels of accuracy if, when, and where the storm will come ashore. Most crises in business are less predictable. Some trends can be tracked, but usually the big disruptive events are things that are impossible to forecast. For example, if we are manufacturing aircraft, we can plot the seasonality and long-term trends, attempting to anticipate peak loads. Then, a fire in the factory causes a crisis that is a total surprise. The impact of the crisis on our business dwarfs anything we had been planning based on market projections, yet we are forced to deal with it immediately.

Once the crisis hits, the average leader becomes unglued for a while. There are so many things to do at once, and triage in the business world is often a neglected skill, so the leader wonders whether to call a meeting or let the front line people work on the most urgent issues without interruption. Communication channels have not been set up to handle the chaos, so instructions or intentions come through as garbled signals. Think of the emergency responders in the World Trade Center after the first tower fell. Instructions were not getting through to all responders, and many additional lives were lost because of it.

The average leader somehow manages to deploy an effort to fight the situation, but it is often meager compared to the proportion of the disaster. People wonder why there was not more specific leadership coming through when it was needed most.

By contrast, the great leader has refined the procedures for communication and action ahead of time. Even though the exact nature of the crisis is not known, the preparation phase is an ongoing high priority. There are often mock “fire drills” to practice damage control and hone communication procedures to be ready in case the real thing happens. For example, a CEO might arrange to distribute a fake internal news release that the toy being sold by his chain was causing deaths. This would force people to react with everything from recalls, to insurance negotiations, to government briefings, to press statements, etc. After practicing the mock disaster, they could hold a debrief meeting and might determine the internal communication between executives was practically nonexistent during the crisis. All of the managers were doing their best to keep a lid on the damage, but the total effort was not well coordinated. This debrief would allow the team to design an information dissemination process so if a crisis ever surfaced, they would be in a far better position.

## **#19 Generates Passion**

A hallmark of great leaders is that they are not only passionate people, but they have an uncanny way of infecting the entire population with that passion. This is a real gift. I believe most leadership skills can be learned, but the ability to spread one's passion to others is usually an inherited trait. If there is no seed, you cannot get it from reading textbooks or from going to courses. The good news is that most people do have the seed of potential in their DNA. They just need to hone the skill so it is optimized.

So, how does a leader develop this skill? One way is through a great mentor or a role model. If you do not have any charismatic leaders in your organization that can teach this skill, I recommend you go online and look up some of the great people from history or present who are particularly good at this skill. I think of people like Zig Zigler, Earl Nightingale, Warren Bennis, Napoleon Hill, Lou Holtz, or Vince Lombardi. There are literally hundreds of great role models, and they all have content on the WEB or in programs that can be purchased. A great source of inspirational tape programs on this topic is the Nightingale Conant Corporation. You can find enough material to keep you learning about spreading passion for years. I know because I have most of the tapes in their library and listen to them often. I have memorized the key points and seek to apply them whenever I can.

Passion is closely aligned with the sense of ownership. If you can get people to recognize the quality of their life is really more in their own hands than they realize, you are on the right track. Teach people to reject being victims and to take control of their situation. Once that is accomplished, it is easy to generate passion because passion is all about an intense desire to achieve something because it will improve the quality of one's life.

## **#20 Lowers Credibility Gap**

In any organization there exist credibility gaps between layers. These gaps lower the trust within the organization and make good communication more difficult. Great leaders have a knack for lowering these gaps by filling in believable information in both directions: up and down.

When there is tension between one layer and another, great leaders work to find out the root cause of the disconnect. It could be a nasty rumor, it could be based on a prior breach of trust, it might be an impending reorganization or merger, it could be due to an outside force like a new government restriction. Whatever the root cause will determine the key to elimination of the gap.

Excellent leaders have a nose for these problems and head them off while the gap is a small crack and before it becomes like the Grand Canyon. They help people breach the divide by getting the two levels to communicate and really negotiate a better position. Weak leaders are more like victims who wait till the battle is raging and the chasm is too broad to cross without a major investment in a bridge.

A leader who has this skill is easy to spot because there are few paralyzing situations that have to be resolved. If you are one of those leaders, it will be evident. If you are not, it will also be evident. Seek to knit the organization together at every opportunity.

## **#21 Build a SAFE Environment**

In most organizations, there is a continual environment of fear. What we need to realize is that there are different kinds of fear. There is the fear due to market conditions or competition that may make a company go bankrupt. We have learned over the past decade that just because a company is great now is no guarantee it will even exist in a year or two. There is really no such thing as job security anymore. As an example, look at Circuit City. In the early years of the decade it was on top of the heap, and even qualified as one of the “Great” companies in Jim Collins’ book *Good to Great*. By 2008, the company was history. So, it is not surprising that few people feel the kind of job security that most individuals felt in the 80’s and 90’s. It is just a fact of life, and that kind of fear needs to be used to create the impetus to do better on a daily basis.

The more crippling kind of fear is a nagging feeling that if I tell the truth about something to my boss, I am going to suffer some kind of punishment. It may not be an immediate demotion or dismissal, but eventually I will be negatively impacted in ways I may not even recognize. So, I clam up and do not share thoughts that could be helpful to my organization.

Great leaders create an environment where this kind of fear is nearly nonexistent. Reason: The lack of fear will allow trust to grow, and in a trusting environment the organization has a much better chance to flourish.

So, what is the mechanism by which great leaders create this lack of fear? They do it by reinforcing candor. They let people know they will not be punished for speaking their truth. On the contrary these leaders show by deeds that people who speak up are actually rewarded for sharing something scary or just not right. That gives these leaders the opportunity to correct small problems before they have huge negative consequences for the organization. That is brilliant leadership!

## **#22 Leaders are Enablers**

On this dimension there is a stark contrast between great leaders and poor ones. In organizations with great leaders, people view their leaders as enablers. They provide a clear and believable vision of the future that is truly compelling to the workers. They provide the resources and support required to reach that vision. They encourage and empower people to put their best efforts into the journey toward success. They celebrate the small wins along the way. If there is a problem, the leaders work to reduce or eliminate it.

When leaders are weak, you see the exact opposite. Leaders are viewed by the employees as barriers. They get in the way of progress by invoking bureaucratic hurdles that make extra work. They use a command and control philosophy that stifles empowerment. There is a foggy vision or the vision is not that exciting to employees. Like if they struggle to make it happen, the result will not be so great. I felt that in my final years with a company I worked for. The vision was very clear they had to shrink their way to success. The meant huge stress and more workers who would be let go year after year. What an awful vision! I left and never looked back. In these organizations people feel they are operating with both hands tied behind their backs. This leads to poor performance, and so the leaders pour on more and more pressure to compensate. It is a viscous circle that reminds me of the water funnel in a toilet. In fact, it is very much like that.

If you want to measure the caliber of a leader, just start asking the people in the organization if that leader is an enabler or a barrier to progress. Their answer will tell you quickly how talented that leader is.

### **#23 Leaders Create Winners**

On this dimension it is easy to see the difference between a good leader and a poor one. Just look at the faces of people in the organization as they go about their daily tasks. Do they look like winners or losers? This is the easiest and quickest way to measure the caliber of a leader.

Great leaders find a way to create a whole society of winners in their organization. Oh sure, not 100% of the people are going to feel great 100% of the time. That would be impossible, but the overarching mood is one of turned on people who are really in control of their fate as much as society will allow them to be. They feel good, and people who feel good work well. They are what Ken Blanchard refers to as “gung ho.” Coming to work is exciting and rewarding because they are making a better world for themselves. That is the true definition of success as coined by Earl Nightingale. He said, “Success is the progressive realization of a worthy ideal.” People under a great leader are successful according to this definition because they are realizing their worthy ideal on a daily basis.

The contrast here is pretty stark because people who work for poor leaders feel trapped. They need a job in order to eat and support their family, but they are far more turned on by organizing a Cub Scout picnic than by making cars or airplanes at work. They live for the things they get outside work and tolerate the abuse on a daily basis to fund the next mortgage payment and buy the meat.

If you want to measure how good a leader is, just talk to the people and find out where on this spectrum most people live. If it is toward the empowered side and people feel like winners, their leader is a good one. If they feel like victims and work simply to get by, chances are their leader is not a very good one.

We do have to be careful in these comparisons to take into account the time a leader has been around. You cannot expect a sick culture to be turned around in a couple weeks. But my contention is that it does not take years for a really good leader to turn around a tough situation. In my experience a great leader can make a huge impact in even the most challenging organization within a year, often within 6 months.

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