

Simple Leadership Truths of Elite Leaders

...One More Article on Leadership?

One more article on leadership; just what we need – right? After all, we all have plenty of time to kick back and read while the ceiling is crumbling in around our desk? And for that matter, what does Susan Cruz know about leadership? Susan is a middle aged, wife and mother of four. Please read on...she is a mid-level executive responsible for \$40,000,000 in revenues and 110 employees with a territory that stretches some 250 miles across portions of two states at a firm in an unforgiving industry which is in tremendous state of turmoil. She is not a high ranked CEO, notable war hero or world-class athlete. But she is a leader who just happens to believe in what she is doing and strives everyday to do it better. She has demonstrated over many years that what she believes works.

Perhaps in different times she would never be heard from, but she has something to say and believes what she shares here will help you navigate these challenging times by focusing on what is important, unchanging and urgent in leadership.

This article is designed to be read, and reread. It is meant to have a place on your desk (it can withstand the ceiling fragments) and be a reminder of the enduring tenants of elite leadership.

A World in Turmoil

The United States is in the middle of two wars, a complete credit collapse and the worst recession since the Great Depression. Those are just some of the current headlines. What about world hunger, AIDs, the cost of healthcare and so many other issues? Who is going to solve all these problems? How do we get from day to day moving the world toward solutions? How do we prevent more problems?

It is clear that we are in challenging times and we are asked to deal with a greater scope and complexity of issues than we ever have before. Now is a time when we leaders must step up. We need to develop leadership skills among those capable managers in the corporate world so that they become elite leaders, we also need to develop those same skills in children and young adults at every level. The world is not going to



become any less complex. Many of the problems we face are familiar, however the speed and volume at which they confront us is accelerating. Teaching leadership has never been more important and more difficult. A critical factor in the long term sustainability of our economic and social survival is the development of leadership talent while keeping our eyes on the need to solve the many, many problems that exist in our tumultuous and uncertain world.

My experience navigating the real world of business has reinforced what I call the “simple truths of elite leaders”. These times are too challenging and our needs too great for average skills. We must strive for a higher level—an elite level of leadership. These simple leadership truths will provide a framework for building the leadership needed today.

The Truth

There are those who believe that leadership has to be a product of new thinking. Nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is fundamental leadership tenets don't change. These tenets are about how to lead. The personal characteristics of integrity, respect for others and good judgment are pre-requisites to leading. A leader does not get out of the starting blocks without these personal characteristics. The tenets may be identified differently, embellished, but the truth is everything one would need to know to lead in these uncertain times can be rolled up into the following six simple truths:

1. It's About Them
2. Relationships
3. Team
4. Everything Matters
5. Communicate A LOT
6. Self-Care is Essential; Not Selfish

If there is a failure in any one of these areas, there will surely be a failure to lead of some sort at some point. The good news is that these are all executable and it doesn't take multiple advanced degrees and 40 years of experience to understand these basic truths.

- It's About Them
- Relationships
- Team
- Everything Matters
- Communicate *A LOT*
- Self-Care is Essential



It's About Them

Leaders can't lead without followers. The fastest way to engender follower-ship is to make what you do and say more about others than about yourself especially in very difficult operating environments. If the organization even sniffs of the idea that the leader is trying to succeed on their back, they will make failure certain. They will know you simply do not care about them. Making certain a leader shows care and consideration for others in all that he or she does is a key way that the leader earns the right to lead and gains followers.

Here is an example that illustrates my point. A manager understands from the senior levels of his company that over the next year there will be consolidation of departments and execution of this consolidation process will effect performance evaluation. The manager wants to be viewed well by senior management and decides to make the first consolidation move within his division. He had just been asked to oversee a new department as part of his division as well. He combines the new department that he had just gained with one of his existing departments. It made sense as they were both fairly small and could easily work together saving the cost of an entire management team. He thinks he is doing a great thing that will reflect well on his leadership skill.

He spent very little time getting to know the highly regarded department head, his story or anything about his performance. In short order it became clear that those of that department that the removal had nothing to do with their former department head or them for that matter. It was about looking good to upper management. This caused distrust and upset among the department members.

This could have been handled differently. It did make sense to combine the two departments. If time had been taken to understand the manager, his performance and his career objectives perhaps another position within the organization could have been found for him. The fact was that the manager was a very good performer and had a history of getting things done along with being well liked by his employees. If the division manager had asked the manager to work with him on the transition so that the people of the department would have felt less displaced he would have engendered a level of trust with the department members as well

Make what you do and say more about them than about yourself.



At the end of the day there is no leader if there are no followers. I have heard Retired General Colin Powell state: “The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” The above example points out the later – the division manager did not care about the people. The move was to make him look good to senior management.

When a manager takes over a new organization he must invest time on the front end getting to know his people understanding what they want to get out of their work and why is an essential first step to building a relationship. Armed with this understanding the manager can almost always wrap the employees objectives into the objectives of the organization, show the employees how they will benefit, while helping them understand and support the objectives of the organization. Then they can see how “it is about them”.

Build Relationships

We build relationships everyday in many ways. A leader needs to focus on a few simple things when building relationships that will allow her to lead effectively. First and foremost listen. When the leader really listens, the follower feels heard, when the follower feels heard, the follower feels understood and when the follower feels understood, the follower is able to trust. Listening is truly critical. It doesn't even matter that you have an answer to the problem and sometimes the follower isn't even looking for a solution. They just want to be heard.

Recently, after an annual cross-evaluation, a leader I know found that her followers felt somewhat disconnected from her and they felt she was only interested in her agenda. This was a lapse in listening and being open to listen. The leader was hearing, but not listening. She was pushing right through what her people were telling her and pressing her own agenda. This will only work for a short period of time.

The leader contacted several of her key constituents and asked them about how they saw her interactions with them. They let her know that they felt they were not heard and felt pushed into what she wanted them to do instead of led into what needed to be done. Actually, during this bit of research one of her people

- Invest time
- Get to know the people
 - What they want
 - Why they want it
- Create understanding of objectives
- Show how objectives benefit them

Listen:
Make certain your people feel heard and understood.



told her how much he enjoyed the conversation because she was open to his comment and vulnerable enough to listen. That is when it clicked. Stop forcing, pushing and be more present with the people. Discuss their concerns, listen to them, make your case, but not before their concerns are heard and digested.

One of our Nation's greatest leaders, Abraham Lincoln, was exceptional at developing and nurturing relationships with his people and those who opposed his point of view. He was of the mind that one must get to know another in order to work with them, and lead them.

In fact, in his acceptance speech for the U.S. senator post at the Republican State Convention in Springfield, Illinois (June 16, 1858), he stated: "A house divided against itself cannot stand... Our cause must be in-trusted to, and conducted by its own undoubted friends—whose hands are free, whose hearts are in the work—who *do care* for the result." (Lincoln on Leadership, Donald T. Phillips, pg. 27, 1992) Lincoln felt this strongly about building alliances and that by doing so great work could be accomplished. He knew that the understanding developed in relationships was key to working together for the greater good and moving people to what must be done.

Team

Jim Collins, in his book "Good to Great", goes into great detail about the importance of developing one's team and having the right people on the team. A leader must understand his people, be especially clear on the strengths and weaknesses of his team members. The team is only as strong as it's weakest member. It only takes one member to destroy the work of the rest of the team. One poor communication from one member can undo months of work done by the rest of the team in any mission.

All members do not have to be great in all areas. The leader has to define roles, determine the requirements of the roles and then make certain the best possible talent is matched to each role.

...one must get to know another in order to work with them and lead them.

- Understand people's strengths and weaknesses
- Define roles and requirements of roles
- Match members strengths to their roles



This can take time. A leader does not want to “lead at right angles” especially when it can have significant impact on another’s life and livelihood. Within the first 90 to 120 days of taking on a new role or adding a new member to the team, the leader should invest much time and energy into getting to know the people or the new member.

The most difficult piece of this process is releasing a team member for whom there is no role on the team. It is possible that there are team members in the wrong roles and that has to be dealt with as well. The leader has to define the roles with great clarity and then ask two questions:

Ask the difficult questions:
...the right role?
...the right person?

Is this person in the right role on this team?
Is this person the right person for this team?

As much as we know it is difficult to release people from their responsibilities, I would ask “How fair or right is it to keep someone in a role they cannot do and don’t like? Knowing they cannot perform and are unhappy; what kind of leadership is it to keep them in place?” The leader must deal with the truth. The truth is this person is miserable, and is failing and the leader is allowing that to continue. The truthful leader works with the person and moves them on to something they can do well and that they do like. It is also important for a leader to understand at it’s very core the relationship between what an individual likes to do and what they do well. No one will do something they do not like doing well for any length of time.

With the right people on the team, a clear understanding of the overall mission, each member understanding their role in the mission and clear accountability and communication regimes set in place a team will be successful.

Mission
Role
Accountability

One truly great example of team leadership is shown in Sir Edmond Shakleton’s 1914 intended journey to Antarctica. He was determined to be the first team to cross the continent. Although, Shakleton was not to cross Antarctica on this expedition, the expedition itself has become one of the most studied leadership stories of all time.

On the subject of team, Shakleton built his direct report team very carefully based on previous history working with some individuals and with those he had not worked with before he took the time to learn of more than their competence. He also



carefully assessed their character. He wanted to know all about them. This played well for him when the expedition took a number of bad turns starting with their ship becoming trapped in the ice of the Weddell Sea less than two months into the venture.

As Shakleton moved through the next nearly two years where problems persisted he put the right members of his team in specific roles which allowed them to maintain a sense of hope and optimism, share the workload, engender creativity and solutions.

In one instance where a crew member struggled with being hopeful about a positive outcome he engaged that member with another direct report who's positive attitude he could count on. Directing activities such as this allowed Shakleton to preserve an overall sense of hope and optimism. Ultimately, Shakleton was able to bring all 28 members of the expedition back home to safety against the worst of circumstances.

Everything Matters

When the world is turned upside down or maybe it just seems that your part of the world is turned upside down, everything you, the leader, does matters. Every move you make and the way you make them are opportunities to help someone else get through the turmoil. With the words you speak, the way you walk, the way you listen and the cadence you maintain you can inspire all those around you to have confidence in the idea that there is another side and we will all get there - we can do this.

In the face of even the most untenable situation the leader has to act and react with confidence. That is not to be misinterpreted as being a "Pollyanna", which must be avoided. This confidence comes from dealing in the facts that you have and truths of the situation and making the best possible decisions based on both. Most often in a difficult situation the facts can get lost in the chaos. The leader has to slow the action enough to find the facts understand them and move the people through the process based on the identified facts. The leader has to be the one who quiets the noise.

When facing a difficult situation or a difficult operating environment the leader has to pay strict attention to how she

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shows up. Think statesman/stateswoman; well put together, calm, confident, well spoken, clear and on message. My father would say, “Straighten your tie and your spine and go out there and do it”. Well, the tie thing applied to my brother, but I believe you can see my point. People will take direction from the person who looks, acts and takes charge of the situation. That person has everything in place and has considered what matters most and executes with a strong, steady cadence.

This quality of “everything matters” is born out in Sir Winston Churchill. Churchill is known for many things: soldier, journalist, lecturer and historian along with his service to Great Britain. Facing imminent attack by the Germans in World War II, it was Churchill’s speeches, behavior and cadence that allowed him to lead the British people through their darkest moments.

Churchill as a person, exuded confidence in his walk, dress, and speech – his total carriage was strong and resolute. This served him well throughout his life, but no better than during the Second World War.

Just three days after he was appointed Prime Minister, he gave what most would agree is his greatest speech. Note the following excerpts from that speech:

Churchill recognized the truth in the situation and portrayed it to the people in this way. “We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering.”

This is an example of Churchill giving direction and evidencing his confidence in his plan and his people. “I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all and I say, come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.”

He gives clarity to the purpose by stating, “It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. This is our policy.”

Churchill was a passionate man, a hero. Here he makes his personal commitment to his people. “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

The Statesman

- Put together
- Calm
- Confident
- Well Spoken
- Clear and on message



Much is written about Sir Winston Churchill and much can be gained by studying his life. He was the epitome “everything matters”.

Communicate *A LOT*

In any leadership situation it is hard to over communicate. In difficult times it simply can't be done. Communication takes many forms: a formal speech given to a large group, written document, informal small group conversation, one on one interactions, and casual conversations and most importantly through listening.

It is critical for a leader to be clear and on message. The leader must always have a message and the message must be repeated with great frequency. Developing the message is the work that must be done when away from the group. The leader must identify the facts, put the facts together in the manner of a story. The story must be simple and give clarity to the situation, and what is to be done about it. The leader must also articulate the role that each individual he communicates to plays in the solution.

Communication is a two way street. It is frequent where a question is asked and the response given is not the answer to the question. This is one way communication. It is intolerable in stressful, difficult situations and turns the group of expected followers completely off. Good communication through listening is to answer the question and then tie the answer into the message that the leader is trying to get across. The question has to be answered if that is possible and if not the leader states so and that they will come back to the group as soon as an answer is found. This can allow the audience to see how they fit into the message and are part of the solution.

One of the best examples we have seen on this leadership truth in recent history is the work of our new President, Barack Obama. Regardless, of your political preference, you have to admit that Obama is on message, creates a sense he is listening, communicates often and in every form of communication. From his books to the White House Blog, President Obama brings a clear message to the people. Initially it was “big picture” and philosophical. It has evolved to a clear consistent

You can't over- communicate.
...be clear and on message
...take fact to story

...answer the question or say you can't and will find the answer and get back to them...then you have to get back to them!



message on specific issues he believes must be addressed, which is exactly what a great communicator does.

Self-Care is Essential, Not Selfish

It is a leader who in the moment is able to make the best decision and move his people to the desired end-game that earns his value in good times and bad. Leaders are in position to make the tough call, do the unpopular and keep all those who follow on target to the goal.

These things cannot be accomplished if the leader does not have the energy, vitality and sheer physical endurance to keep his head in the game. This is why it is not selfish to take extreme care of one's self.

We have all heard on an airliner to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you attempt to help others. This is critical. Quite bluntly, if you are dead, you will not be able to help anyone.

In years past, I worked well into the night and rose early to work more before everyone else got into the game. I found however, that I was short with people, did not think decisions through to the best possible outcome where a rested mind would have been able to and that I was always tired. "I'm tired" was my mantra. I wore it like a badge of honor. Then I tried sleeping 7-8 hours a night. What a difference! I had always been a big runner and did a lot of physical activity and ate with perfect discipline. I just didn't get the needed sleep. I tried to slide on 5-6 hours a night. It was particularly interesting to find that once I corrected this one area that I got more done, handled people much better and enjoyed my work much more. Since I wasn't playing the "I'm tired" recording in my head, I didn't play the martyr either.

It is an interesting point that 52% of plane crashes happen when the pilot has been awake for more than twelve hours. If we think of ourselves at twelve hours into the day, for most of us it is not the time when we want to take on detailed, potentially life threatening decision-making.

Self-care involves many things, diet, exercise, sleep and down time away from work. A hobby that you can get lost in is a great break from the requirements of leading. A balanced life

Put the oxygen mask on yourself first!

- Self-care
 - Diet
 - Exercise
 - Sleep
 - Diverse Interests



full of diverse interests is critical to the leader who wants a long successful career and it also makes a great example for all those who follow.

These Simple Truths...

There is much written about leadership and much more will be written. As I sat and contemplated this writing, I looked at many topics and as I pulled them apart I concluded that these six are leadership at its core. A leader cannot execute successfully without at least these six simple Truths.

Keep this at your desk. Refer to it often. Reach out to me at revlead.com. I would like to hear your leadership success stories.

