



Chapter 2

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership

We've been conducting intensive research on leadership since 1982. During that entire time, in selecting the people to interview and survey we have consistently chosen not to focus on famous people in positions of power who make headlines. Instead, we've always wanted to know what the vast majority of leaders do—those ordinary people who get extraordinary things done in organizations. We have concentrated our research on people who lead project teams, manage departments, administer schools, organize community groups, and volunteer for student and civic organizations.

To conduct our research, we asked thousands of people, in writing and in interviews, to tell us about their “Personal-Best Leadership Experience.” Each person was asked to select a project, program, or significant event that represented a time he or she believed represented his or her own “best practices” leadership experience—the one he or she personally recalled when thinking about a peak leadership performance.

Despite the differences in people's individual stories, the Personal-Best Leadership Experiences that we read and listened to revealed similar patterns of action. We found that when leaders are at

their personal best, they engage in The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership. They:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

Let's take a brief look at each of these practices before you apply them to your project.

MODEL THE WAY

Titles are granted, but it's your behavior that wins you respect. If you want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, you must be a model of the behavior that you expect of others.

To model effectively, you must first believe in something. As a leader, you are supposed to stand up for your beliefs, so you had better have some beliefs to stand up for. The first commitment you must make, then, is to *find your voice* by clarifying your personal values and then expressing them in a style that is authentically your own.

Eloquent speeches about your personal values are not nearly enough. Your deeds are far more important than your words when expressing how serious you are about what you say, and your words and deeds must be consistent. Exemplary leaders go first. You go first by *setting the example* through daily actions that demonstrate you are deeply committed to your beliefs. And one of the actions you must take is to build consensus around shared values. You can't impose your values on others, no matter how hard you try or how much power you have. Unless values are shared among all those who work together, intense commitment is impossible. What you get is simply compliance.

The personal-best projects we heard about in our research were all distinguished by relentless effort, steadfastness, competence, and attention to detail. We were struck by how the actions leaders took to set the example were often simple things. Sure, leaders had operational and strategic plans, but the actions they described were all the day-to-day things they did to practice what they preached.

You set the example by spending time with someone, by working side by side with col-

leagues, by telling stories that make the values come alive, by being highly visible during times of uncertainty, and by asking questions to help people to think about values and priorities. Modeling the way is essentially about earning the right and the respect to lead through direct individual involvement and action. People first follow the person, then the plan.

INSPIRE A SHARED VISION

When people described their Personal-Best Leadership Experiences, they told of times when they imagined an exciting, highly attractive future for their organization. They had visions and dreams of what could be. They had absolute and total personal belief in those dreams, and they were confident in their abilities to make extraordinary things happen. Every organization, every social movement, begins with a dream.

Leaders *envision the future*. They gaze across the horizon of time, imagining the attractive opportunities that are in store once they and their constituents arrive at the final destination. Leaders have a desire to make something happen, to change how things are, to create something that no one else has ever created before.

In some ways, leaders live their lives backward. They see pictures in their mind's eye of what the results will look like even before they have started their project, much as an architect draws a blueprint or an engineer builds a model. Their clear image of the future pulls them forward. Yet a vision seen only by a leader is insufficient to create an organized movement or a significant change in a company. A person with no constituents is not a leader, and people do not follow until they accept a vision as their own. Leaders cannot command commitment; they can only inspire it. Leaders *enlist others* in a common vision.

To enlist people in a vision, as a leader you must know your constituents and be able to relate to them in ways that energize and uplift them. People must believe that their leader understands their needs and has their interests at heart. Only through an intimate knowledge of their dreams, hopes, aspirations, visions, and values are you able to enlist support. Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue.

Leaders breathe life into the hopes and dreams of others and enable them to see the exciting possibilities that the future holds. Leaders forge unity of purpose by showing constituents how the dream is for the common good. You cannot ignite the flame of passion in others if you cannot express enthusiasm for the compelling vision of the group. You must communicate your passion through vivid language and expressive style.

Without exception, the leaders in our study reported that they were incredibly enthusiastic

about their personal-best projects. Their own excitement was catching; it spread from leader to constituents. Their belief in and commitment to the vision were the sparks that ignited the flame of inspiration.

CHALLENGE THE PROCESS

Leaders venture out. None of the individuals in our study sat idly by waiting for fate to smile upon them. While “luck” or “being in the right place at the right time” may play a role in the specific opportunities leaders embrace, those who lead others to greatness seek and accept challenge.

Every single Personal-Best Leadership Experience we collected involved some kind of challenge. The challenge may have been developing an innovative new product, coming up with a cutting-edge service, shaping a groundbreaking piece of legislation, spearheading an invigorating campaign to get adolescents to join an environmental program, leading a revolutionary turnaround of a bureaucratic military program, or starting up a new plant or business. Whatever the challenge, all the cases involved a change from the status quo. Not one person claimed to have done his or her personal best by keeping things the same. All leaders Challenge the Process.

Leaders are pioneers—people who are willing to step out into the unknown. They *search for opportunities* to innovate, grow, and improve. But it’s impossible for you, or for any leader, to be the only creator or originator of new products, services, or processes. Product and service innovations tend to come from customers, clients, vendors, people in the labs, and people on the front lines, while process innovations tend to come from the people doing the work. Your primary contribution to the search for opportunities is in the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas, and the willingness to challenge the system in order to get new products, processes, services, and systems adopted.

Leaders know well that innovation and change require them to *experiment and take risks*. One way of dealing with the potential risks and failures of experimentation is to approach change through incremental steps and small wins. Little victories when piled on top of each other build enough confidence to meet even the biggest challenges. By building incrementally, you strengthen commitment to the long-term future. Yet not everyone is equally comfortable with risk and uncertainty. You also must pay attention to the capacity of your constituents to take control of challenging situations and become fully committed to change.

Yet even the most prepared and skilled people never succeed at 100 percent of what they do. This is even more true when they are taking big risks and experimenting with new, untried concepts and methods. Risk and experimentation are always accompanied by mistakes and failure. The key that unlocks the door to opportunity is learning. Great leaders are great learners. You must create a climate in which people can learn from their failures as well as their successes.

ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT

Grand dreams do not become significant reality through the actions of a single leader. Leadership is a team effort. After reviewing thousands of Personal-Best Experiences, we developed a simple test to detect whether someone is on the road to becoming a leader. That test is the frequency of the use of the word *we*.

Exemplary leaders Enable Others to Act. They *foster collaboration* and build trust. This sense of teamwork goes far beyond a few direct reports or close confidants. In today's "virtual" organization, cooperation cannot be restricted to a small group of loyalists; it must include peers, managers, customers and clients, suppliers, citizens—all those who have a stake in the vision. You have to involve, in some way, everyone who must live with the results, and you must make it possible for others to do good work.

Leaders also know that no one does his or her best when feeling weak, incompetent, or alienated; they know that those who are expected to produce the results must feel a sense of personal power and ownership. Leaders understand that the command-and-control techniques of the Industrial Revolution no longer apply. Instead, leaders work to *strengthen others* to deliver on the promises they make. You can't hoard the power you have as a leader; you must give it away. When you trust others and give them more discretion, more authority, and more information, they are much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results.

In the cases we analyzed, leaders proudly discussed teamwork, trust, and empowerment as essential elements of their efforts. A leader's ability to Enable Others to Act is essential. Constituents neither perform at their best nor stick around for very long if their leader makes them weak, dependent, or alienated. When you make someone feel strong and capable—as if he or she can do more than he or she ever thought possible—that person will give all and exceed your own expectations. When leadership is a relationship, founded on trust and confidence, people take risks, make changes, and keep organizations and movements alive.

ENCOURAGE THE HEART

The climb to the top is arduous and long. People become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanting. They are often tempted to give up. Leaders Encourage the Heart of their constituents to carry on. Genuine acts of caring uplift the spirits and draw people forward.

Encouragement can come from dramatic gestures or simple actions. It's part of the leader's job to *recognize contributions* by showing appreciation for individual excellence. In the cases we collected, there were thousands of examples of individual recognition. We've heard and seen everything, including marching bands, costumed skits, "This Is Your Life" imitations, as well as T-shirts, note cards, personal thank-you's, and a host of other awards.

Leaders also *celebrate the values and victories*. Celebrations are not about fun and games, although there is a lot of fun and there are a lot of games when you Encourage the Hearts of your constituents. Neither are they about pretentious ceremonies designed to create a phony sense of camaraderie. When people observe a charlatan making noisy affectations, they turn away in disgust. Encouragement is curiously serious business. It's how leaders visibly and behaviorally link rewards with performance.

When striving to raise quality, recover from disaster, start up a new service, or make dramatic change of any kind, leaders make sure people see the benefit of behavior that's aligned with cherished values. And leaders also know that celebrations and rituals, when done with authenticity and from the heart, build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through extraordinary tough times.

THE FIVE PRACTICES AND TEN COMMITMENTS OF LEADERSHIP

Embedded in The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are behaviors that can serve as the basis for learning to lead. We call these The Ten Commitments of Leadership. The Five Practices and The Ten Commitments serve as the structure for this Workbook, and as the foundation that supports the activities in this Workbook. We'll apply them to your project in the chapters that follow.

Take a look at the following page for a summary of The Five Practices and The Ten Commitments. They're what leaders use to get extraordinary things done in organizations. Let them be your guide on your journey to success.

THE FIVE PRACTICES AND TEN COMMITMENTS OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP



- 1. FIND YOUR VOICE** by clarifying your personal values.
- 2. SET THE EXAMPLE** by aligning actions with shared values.



- 3. ENVISION THE FUTURE** by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
- 4. ENLIST OTHERS** in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.



- 5. SEARCH FOR OPPORTUNITIES** by seeking innovative ways to change, grow, and improve.
- 6. EXPERIMENT AND TAKE RISKS** by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes.



- 7. FOSTER COLLABORATION** by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.
- 8. STRENGTHEN OTHERS** by sharing power and discretion.



- 9. RECOGNIZE CONTRIBUTIONS** by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
- 10. CELEBRATE THE VALUES AND VICTORIES** by creating a spirit of community.

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