

What Makes a Leader, Great?

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There are many dimensions that contribute to a leader's strategy for success. I would like to focus your attention on two of them as they hold potential value to you in your desire to succeed in your management role. I will start by highlighting the insights from two other sources because I believe these authors got it right.

The first dimension is the attention the leader pays to the changed global context surrounding organizational life. In their preface to the 2002, third edition of The Leadership Challenge, Kouzes and Posner asked leaders to compare what's new and different today from the late 1980's when the first edition appeared. Regardless of age and experience, the consistent

answer was that there has been no change in the five core competencies that make a leader great. These five competencies are:

1. Model the way
2. Challenge the process
3. Inspire a shared vision
4. Enable others to act
5. Encourage the heart.

However, the respondents concurred there's been an accelerated change in the global context in which they work. They often find themselves at a loss for how to deal decisively with situations they admittedly have not encountered. Let's consider a few highlights of the changed global context discussed in the preface to the third edition. Included are the questions the authors pose that are implied by each change.

1. People first, profits second: Thankfully, we see evidence all around us of people's needs coming before profit. The question is, "Will the competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, and interpersonal skills, like collaboration, remain in ascendance?"
2. Social capital: In the authors' view, social capital has replaced knowledge capital as the new economic resource. This means that "who you know" has edged out "what you know" in order of importance to leadership success. Human networks make things happen more than computer networks. So the question becomes, "How do you help leaders learn that it is as much the

human heart as the human head that makes the world go round?"

3. A changing workforce: The workforce is diverse by every definition. So the questions are posed, "How do leaders embrace individual uniqueness and create wholeness out of diversity? How do leaders make an asset out of difference, and find a common purpose with which all can identify?"
4. Even more intense search for meaning: People show a growing yearning for a sense of higher purpose. So, the question is, "How can leaders provide a climate for people to bring their souls to work, not just their heads and hands?"

The second dimension that I share with you is in some sense a response to the questions raised by Kouzes and Posner. Being an effective leader involves continuing to develop interpersonal skills. If social capital is the coin of the realm, then great leaders are and will be those individuals with sophisticated interpersonal competencies becoming known as high emotional intelligence. Their ability to confidently lead, employ finely honed instincts as well as disciplined reflection on their past experiences, is their starting point. However, one caveat is that over reliance on these strengths can become a weakness. As discussed by Kaplan and Kaiser in, The Versatile Leader: Make the Most of Your Strengths without Overdoing It, leaders are

most effective when they not only identify their competencies, but recognize where they are lopsided due to overuse of those competencies. The old adage, "if all you have is a hammer, everything you see is a nail", holds true. For instance, if leaders tend to dominate meetings by talking a lot, their verbal strength can become a weakness. This occurs if they lose sight of the importance of using active listening skills to influence and involve others. It is especially true in times of conflict and turmoil. Excess dependency on any leadership competency can skew their game. It sacrifices the benefits inherent in behaving opposite to one's inclination. For instance, deciding it is best to be very open with one's colleagues can result in abdicating one's responsibility to be discreet with sensitive information. The Kaplan/Kaiser model describes the following developmental process: identify one's strengths, then identify if and where strengths are overused and in what situations, next, discover the paired opposite of the strength and based on situations that arise, experiment with using the opposite competency. This process defines effectiveness as versatility in using the entire range of leadership competencies, situation dependent. An executive coach can be instrumental in guiding a leader through this process. The Kaplan/Kaiser approach bears some resemblance to the theory behind the

Myers/Briggs Type Indicator personality assessment tool, especially the Step 2 Form Q version designed for use in executive coaching and leadership development assessments and interventions. (MBTI Step 2 Form Q, www.cpp.com, Consulting Psychologists Press, 2006 edition). The model and the assessment tool both provide value in helping one identify strengths, identify when strengths are overused and build awareness of one's relative weaknesses.

Building on success opens the door for the leader to seek out coaching. An executive coach can assist with practice and fine tuning in handling uncomfortable interpersonal situations. It takes courage to handle complex misunderstandings stemming from turf battles that arise between people. For example, when confronted with an angry attorney in the firm complaining about a peer's taking undue credit for handling a complex case, there is a natural tendency to rely on the well oiled advocacy skills of the attorney turned manager. However, this approach may interfere with a more delicate facilitated discussion that aims to balance all points of view. As a side benefit, direct reports become more skillful themselves in handling future conflicts.

In addition, it takes a great deal of courage to "speak truth to power".

This applies to the situation when a manager realizes there is an urgent business/professional ethics concern needing to be addressed with their superior, but is ambivalent as to when and how and even whether to bring it up.

In closing, two important dimensions that contribute to leadership effectiveness have been presented. Today's leader is urged to attend to both the global context surrounding organizational life as well as the particulars of the importance of social capital, with the concomitant recommendation to invest and grow in one's interpersonal competencies, so to be regarded as a great leader.