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Leading with Two Left Brains?

By Jamie Shallow

“Leadership’ is the snake oil of our day. Everybody is peddling it, it’s offered as a panacea for anything that ails us, and there’s no proof it has any benefit at all—or for that matter, even exists.”

I’ve seen a few articles like this lately that seem to dismiss the significance of leadership, with some arguing that the best thing a leader can do is get out of the way. I’m not sure where this current line of thinking is coming from, but perhaps it’s stemming from the reality that leaders are imperfect people, as we all are, and that in the end leaders are only facilitators. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink, right?

That said, the school of organizational behavior is filled with studies on leadership that affirm its value. Additionally, we can all, as students of life, look around us and observe leadership in action and its positive impact. For example, I recently met O’Neal Hampton, an inspiring contestant from season 9 of the TV show *The Biggest Loser*. Just being around him impacted my attitude for the day. But, what we can notice even more in watching *The Biggest Loser* is the impact that Bob and Jillian (and other coaches) have on the contestants. People who have been trapped in destructive patterns for years suddenly find motivation to sacrifice and work hard, believe in themselves again, and achieve success in reaching their potential and gaining their life back.

Clearly, having a leader believe in you can make all the difference in the world.

TWO LEFT BRAINS?

OK, so we’ve heard it said that folks who can’t dance have the misfortune of having “two left feet.” Could there be a parallel for folks who are “leadership challenged”? Could it be said that some of us suffer from having “two left brains”? Leadership coach and actuary Jeanne Lebens has noted in previous *Stepping Stone* articles that oftentimes the skills and behaviors required for

effective leadership are not innate in folks drawn to the actuarial profession. As analyticals, we tend to be left-brain dominant.

Another issue that is common in our profession, that leaders in human capital acknowledge is rather common in many areas of corporations, is the method of promotion to leadership. Common practice is to promote someone who is a skilled technician to the role of leading other technicians. The assumption is made that being a skilled technician means aptitude at leading people performing the technical task. This is not always true, and oftentimes a company will lose a good technician and gain a poor leader. As many of us have realized, leadership requires a unique set of skills. Yet, as leaders we affect others’ lives either for good or for bad, so it’s important to consider how we are leading.

GETTING IT RIGHT—OUTSIDE THE BOX

So what is the secret to the heart of leadership? How do we work on getting more balance? Well, the common buzzword in today’s culture is emotional intelligence, or EQ. There are many elements that make up EQ, but maybe we can narrow it down to a very singular focus.

In the book *Leadership and Self-Deception*,² the point of singular focus is presented—getting outside of the box. But what does that mean? The book defines it as a paradigm shift where we begin to see others as they are—people, as opposed to mere objects. It can be said that managers manage things, but leaders lead people.

As left-brained analyticals, there is probably an even stronger innate tendency to remain inside the box. But, legendary coach Vince Lombardi gave the secret away years ago when he stated, **“There are other coaches who know more about X’s and O’s.... But I’ve got an edge. I know more about football players than they do.”**



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In organizational behavior terms, the difference may be described as transactional leadership versus transformational leadership. Lombardi was a master at the transformational style. Transactional is more focused on duties and tasks, while transformational is more outside the box—involving vision, trust, empathy and compassion. It is more relational, and acknowledges that leadership moves beyond making sure duties and tasks are completed on time to recognizing that the duties are being assigned to people who have real needs, feelings, goals and dreams.

Another form of transformational leadership that is worth mentioning here is servant leadership. I have heard Art Williams, the founder of financial service giant Primerica, say on more than one occasion that as a leader your people are not working for you, rather you are working for your people. This is the basis of servant leadership—to see that in reality, as a leader, we are to serve our team and focus on helping them reach their potential. In doing this, we will help our companies achieve their maximum as well.

GENUINELY RIGHT

In a recent book review for *The Stepping Stone*,

I noted that at the Zappos company they strive to deliver WOW to their customers, and that to do so it is important to be genuine.³ To attempt to deliver a WOW experience only for the sake of profit and sales will not usually be successful. The same is true in leadership—leading people as people must be genuine. But how do we get there?

I was speaking with a co-worker recently and we were discussing the concept of how a person can gain compassion. It's a very intriguing subject to ponder. How do we grow in compassion? To gain insight, it is helpful to consider a few examples. If you are the type of person to always get A's, do you genuinely appreciate when someone does their best, works very hard, and delivers B work? How do you get to the place where you do? Should you? Yes, if your goal is to help get the maximum out of people. Remember, believing in people will help them achieve their potential!

Another way to look at it is that genuine is the difference in how you would feel if you had received news that *my* child had been injured in an accident versus how you'd feel if you heard the same about *your* child. I recently participated in a March of Dimes walk and as we finished there were posters of children and their stories along the path. It definitely stirred up tears for me, but it was still not the same as if it had been my child.

I've heard experience defined as "*something that happens to you that you wish to heck happened to someone else.*" It is through experience, trials, failures and sufferings that we gain genuine compassion, empathy and maturity.

In two executive interviews featured in *The New York Times* in recent years, some senior leaders revealed their recognition of this reality. Robin Domeniconi, senior vice president and chief brand officer for the Elle Group, responded to what she looks for in an interview by noting:

"I don't look at resumes at all. Because they absolutely don't tell me how somebody's going to work for me.... I will try to find out what kind of life you've had, where you've come from, what challenges you've had to overcome. I really don't care about your

successes as much as I care about your failures, and what you've learned from them....”⁴

Similarly, Mark B. Templeton, president and CEO of Citrix, noted:

“The second thing I look for is scars. You can call it wisdom, you can call it experience, or the things that went wrong in your life. That’s where I think knowledge turns into wisdom.”⁵

It seems the old saying is correct—no pain, no gain. ●

ENDNOTES

¹ Fleming, B. 2013. “Leadership” is the Military’s Snake Oil. May 23. Retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com.

² The Arbinger Institute. 2002. *Leadership and Self-Deception (Getting Out of the Box)*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

³ Hsieh, T. 2010. *Delivering Happiness—A Path to Profits, Passion, and Purpose*. New York: Business Plus.

⁴ Bryant, A. 2011. Say Anything, but Phrase It the Right Way. Jan. 15 Retrieved from www.nytimes.com.

⁵ Bryant, A. 2012. Paint by Numbers or Connect the Dots. Sept. 22. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com.

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