



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Five Reality Checks True Leaders Must Give Themselves

By Marcel Schwantes



Marcel Schwantes is CEO of Leadership from the Core. His company's biggest calling is to help leaders influence change, build high-trust cultures and achieve optimal organizational health through servant leadership. Reach him at info@coachmarcel.com or visit www.leadershipfromthecore.com for more information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everyone is capable of building the character necessary to inspire their team on an emotional level and win their trust. Here, servant leadership and executive coach Marcel Schwantes provides five reality checks to help leaders and aspiring leaders gauge their leadership aptitude and assess what changes need to be made.

Leadership is not for the faint of heart. It never has been. The essence of leadership lies within who you are and how you behave. It is character-driven.

In fact, leadership and character are one and the same. Becoming a leader means embarking on a courageous journey of strength and integrity. Not everyone is qualified, but everyone is capable if given the tools.

All leaders must reach a point where they look in the mirror and have a gut-check, asking themselves some honest questions. But before we get to the hard realities that every leader or aspiring leader must face to understand what it *truly* takes to successfully

lead others, a caution: There are prerequisites. You don't just arrive at great and sustainable leadership with a rub of the genie's bottle.

You need strong foundational work and pillars that may take months if not years to develop.

You need to create a compelling vision that inspires the people "in your bus" to help you achieve it. And that vision has to be stacked on top of a solid framework of personal and organizational values that are practiced in hallways and conference rooms, not just displayed as words on a wall.

Finally, you need good bus-driving skills. If your geeked-up project team along for the ride doesn't know in what direction they're headed or why they're being steered in that direction, then you need to stop, put that bus in reverse, park, get everyone off and start over.

In all my years of coaching leaders to lead better, or being an unfortunate member of unhealthy and disengaged executive teams at former companies, I have seen firsthand some disastrous outcomes from leaders who fail to create an environment that allows people to thrive—where they are encouraged to work collaboratively, utilizing their unique talents, creativity, personality strengths and skills to achieve common goals.

The best leaders never stop learning and growing. They are introspective, look for opportunities to develop themselves, and will continually hone and fine-tune their leadership skills in order to serve others better. On top of hard managerial, left-brain skills that drive bottom-line results, they have uncanny intuition and perception to understand the emotional realities of the circumstances and people around them. They will then operate on those realities, often in support of elevating their own and other's behaviors and actions.

Here are five reality checks that will help you gauge your leadership aptitude and assess whether changes need to be made.

REALITY CHECK #1: LEADERS CAN'T MOTIVATE PEOPLE; THEY CAN ONLY INSPIRE THEM TO MOTIVATE THEMSELVES

Readers of Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* will recall that the intrinsic self-motivation Goleman talks about in the "Self-Management" quadrant of emotional intelligence can only come from deep within a person. You can try to pound into a person's noggin all the motivational-guru psychobabble a book or seminar has to offer, but none of it will stick if the person you're trying to motivate doesn't buy into your vision. It takes inspiration.

Inspiration in its most authentic form appeals on an emotional level to win hearts as well as minds. To truly engage your employees with an inspired approach, you need to capture their attention and hit the core of what motivates them. This takes the artful skill of communicating with influence.

When you shift your leadership perspective—moving from a power structure of tasks being handed down from Mt. Sinai to a worker bee culture, to a structure that communicates a compelling vision, encourages shared decision-making and empowers its tribe—you inspire team members to succeed on an emotional level.

This is when your employees will spring out of bed in the morning because they cannot wait to get to work and contribute. They will be motivated.

REALITY CHECK #2: LEADERS NEED TO KNOW THE CORE ELEMENTS NECESSARY TO ATTRACT AND KEEP THE MOST TALENTED EMPLOYEES

You inspired your employees. They feel empowered. They are ready to be rock stars. Now what?

One way to find out what they need to keep going is to get schooled on the best talent management practices out there and then align them to suit your performance management plan. You can start with The Gallup organization. They've interviewed

literally millions of employees across the globe and have a plethora of well-researched resources to maximize the workplace.

One such study, the "Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey,"¹ interviewed over 80,000 managers across a broad range of companies, industries and countries to find the core of a great workplace. Thanks to Gallup, leaders can measure the core elements needed to attract, focus and keep their most talented employees by asking simple questions like:

1. Do my employees know what is expected of them?
2. Do my employees have the materials and equipment they need to do their work right?
3. Do my employees have the opportunity to do what they do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have my top performers received recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Do immediate managers/supervisors seem to care about them as people?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages their development?

REALITY CHECK #3: LEADERS NEED TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND ASK, "DOES MY BEHAVIOR INCREASE TRUST?"

Trust is the pillar your leadership should stand on. While trust is somewhat of a subjective concept, leadership behaviors that promote trust can be defined, measured and improved upon.

In *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey highlights behaviors that are culturally ingrained in the leadership structures of some great companies known for high employee engagement. These are just a few trusted behaviors that drive performance and define how leadership teams and employees interact day to day.

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Trust is certainly a reciprocal concept—it needs to be shared, extended and be mutually beneficial for it to work.

Among those trusted behaviors are:

- Creating transparency
- Showing loyalty
- Delivering results
- Confronting reality
- Clarifying expectations
- Practicing accountability
- Listening first
- Keeping commitments
- Extending trust.

Trust is certainly a reciprocal concept—it needs to be shared, extended and be mutually beneficial for it to work. You might want to take some of those bullets above for a spin. Create a quick questionnaire and toss it around for feedback to see where you and your team stand with trusted behaviors. It might surprise you.

What questions might such a questionnaire include? Consider the bullet point “showing loyalty,” for example. You might ask yourself and your employees, “Do I give credit freely?”

Other examples:

- Listening first: Do I show real interest in what others say?
- Practicing accountability: Do I blame others when things go wrong? Do I take responsibility for results?
- Deliver results: Do I overpromise and underdeliver? Do I make excuses for a lack of results?

REALITY CHECK #4: LEADERS NEED TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THEMSELVES AND OTHERS TO ACHIEVE GREATNESS

Self-awareness, another component of emotional intelligence, is one of the most important capabilities for leaders to develop. Remember, these are learned

traits. So, let me suggest that the first “to do” on your path to leadership greatness is to know your true, authentic self. What does that look like in real life, you ask?

A self-aware person will naturally exhibit traits of humble self-confidence, because that’s what it will take to change something that no longer works.

A self-aware leader also shows resilience. A leader with a resilient mindset rewards himself or herself for corrective behavior, such as deciding to try it again a different way. Instead of self-defeated victim behaviors—e.g., asking “Why me?”—self-aware leaders probe and ask themselves questions like:

- Why do the same issues keep coming up over and over in my business unit, marriage, or life?
- Why do I respond to situations with anger, fear, optimism or withdrawal?
- What makes me think, act and feel the way I do? What makes me tick? What pushes my buttons?

Having self-understanding gives you an edge. You can manage yourself and your emotions, identify opportunities for development, and make the most of your strengths.

REALITY CHECK #5: LEADERS HAVE TO BE WILLING TO LISTEN TO CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK—ESPECIALLY THE KIND THEY DON’T WANT TO HEAR

Many leaders don’t want to listen to the ideas, opinions and constructive feedback of others. It’s hard to acknowledge something that may be true, because truth sometimes hurts. We might fear loss of respect from our peers or subordinates.

So, while such leaders may appear strong on the outside, in reality, their fears and insecurities send a loud message that they don’t want anyone to disagree with their views. Unfortunately, if you’ve ever worked with this type of leader, it can be exhausting.

Leaders who listen well do so with active listening. This helps to filter any criticism, strain out emotion and find the facts. They can respond appropriately, cutting out the drama.

If you're still filtering through your emotions and can't shake off the urge to react, it may be helpful to probe and ask questions—and keep asking them until you get clarification and understand what the speaker is trying to tell you. This means you should listen to understand and always focus on the future.

As I mentioned earlier, if you are in the infancy stages of your development as a leader, or even if you're facing some hard truths about your leadership style from those around you, start by looking within and building up good self-awareness to define your present reality and then figure out what authentic leadership behaviors need to be learned and practiced day to day. This change process will take courage, but it comes with the territory of being a strong and effective leader. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ Available at <https://q12.gallup.com/Public/en-us/Features>.

For leaders interested in assessing their own strengths and limitations, contact the author at info@coachmarcel.com for a list of standardized questionnaires and assessments he personally recommends and uses with his clients, to help with Reality Checks #4 and #5.

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THE MANAGEMENT & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT (MPD) SECTION COUNCIL

is reaching out to all section members ...

Stay tuned for a contest that will run this summer!

The contest will give you the chance to share leadership principles and be featured in *The Stepping Stone*, on the MPD Section Web page at www.SOA.org/mpd, and to win various prizes.

The MPD Section Council will announce the winners during the MPD breakfast book review session at the 2015 SOA Annual Meeting & Exhibit in October.

We look forward to sharing the contest details with you in July!