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How Great Leaders Share Leadership

By Marcel Schwantes

Editor's Note: In the November 2015, February 2016 and May 2016 issues of The Stepping Stone,¹ executive coach Marcel Schwantes outlined how great leaders display authenticity, value and develop people—three of the foundations of effective servant leadership. Now Schwantes returns for Part 4 of a six-part series, discussing one of the most counterintuitive best practices of servant leaders—allowing others to share leadership. Here, he describes the four basics for creating leader-leader rather than leader-follower cultures.

I hear a lot of language about how leaders “drive performance.” Driving, as you know, is a popular word in business. It’s a hard management skill. Yet over the years I have learned that leadership culture has changed. Driving no longer holds a favorable place in servant-led cultures. If you think about it, we drive cattle, cars and trucks; they have no say because “we’re in charge.” We push them through and steer them where we want them to go, but that’s the opposite of what a great leader does or is.

A leader inspires and encourages excellent performance, and followers attribute authority to those they trust. The truth here is that people want to be inspired into action, not driven like cattle.

Now I’m going to tell you to consider doing something powerful and counterintuitive as an employee engagement strategy.

First, an illustration.

To this day, Bruce is my favorite executive boss. That relationship goes back 15 years, well before I founded my company. I was a director reporting to Bruce at a large hospital in California. Bruce taught me so many leadership lessons. He didn’t get caught up in his personal power; he inspired me by making me feel like an equal. Since humility was a natural strength of his, he never took advantage of his title or positional power. He was the most approachable boss I ever had. And while we played different roles in business, we shared in the decision-making.

There were so many instances where he could have pulled rank, like the time when I was tasked for the first time ever to write a portion of a federal grant and needed the support of key community stakeholders. Instead of leveraging his name to sell the project and get buy-in from potential partners, he put me in the

distinct role of community organizer. Bruce made sure I had a seat at the table in all the important coalitions and provided me with all the resources I needed to get signed Letters of Authorization and Memoranda of Understanding. When I was stuck, instead of spoon-feeding me answers, he offered coaching questions like, “What do you think would be the best option in this situation?”

He would often mentor me in areas where he wanted me to take ownership and then put me in places I least expected—like the time he made me chair of an executive council, which is usually a spot reserved for him or another peer executive. While I was still accountable to him, and he was still “the boss,” it stretched me to learn new skills and rise up to meet my own leadership challenges. And I remember how much more satisfied and engaged I was than at any other role in my corporate life to that point—because he shared leadership.

If that resonates with you, you may want to ask yourselves at some point: How can I help my workers succeed by sharing and delegating my power? How can I help them get it?

For the rest of this article, we will focus on four areas that have been proven over time to develop a culture of trust and loyalty in workers.

GREAT LEADERS FACILITATE A SHARED VISION

Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes, authors of the best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge*, have surveyed tens of thousands of employees about what they look for and admire in a leader. Seventy-two percent want leaders who are forward-looking. Among respondents in more senior roles, the percentage shot up to 88 percent.²

But even more important than a visionary is a leader who reflects the visions and aspirations of his or her constituents. This leader learns to communicate an image of the future that draws the tribe in—that speaks to what people see and feel.

As most MBA programs teach, great visions will answer these three questions:

- **Destination.** Where are we going?
- **Purpose.** Why do we exist? What greater good do we serve?
- **Values.** What principles guide our decisions and actions on our journey?

When a vision addresses all three of these questions for team members, a tremendous amount of energy is unleashed. There is going to be a higher level of commitment because they are able to see the relationship between the direction of the organization and what they personally believe in and care deeply about. After all, they signed up for this. As their leader, you learn to communicate an image of the future that speaks to what they see and

feel, why they are doing the work, and how their work contributes to the bigger picture.

But the vision isn't being driven forcefully. Great leaders encourage their tribes to contribute their ideas, insights and realities.

GREAT LEADERS SHARE POWER AND RELEASE CONTROL

The leaders in this relationship economy have a penchant to serve the needs of others first. What makes them stand out is an intrinsic motivation to share power and release control. As a servant leader, the power and the control come from the whole. It's the enthusiasm and commitment the whole team has to something—to specific projects and tasks that drive organizational objectives.

If you want to foster high trust, high risk-taking, high creativity and open communication, and you're still riding on your autocratic high-horse, consider getting off for the higher road of sharing power and releasing control. Because when you do, you actually gain real power by pumping fear out of the room; your team will have your back, unleash discretionary effort and do amazing work.

GREAT LEADERS SHARE STATUS AND PROMOTE OTHERS

Great leaders enable their people by sharing status. Since humility is a natural strength of theirs, instead of leveraging their positional power for personal gain, self-promotion or demands for special privileges, they put their people in positions of leadership to stretch their growth and develop new strengths. The return on sharing status is a culture of leaders, not followers, who will make others better as well.

GREAT LEADERS PUSH AUTHORITY DOWN

Everybody is familiar with the leader-follower structure in a top-down culture, right? It's still the prevalent way most companies operate. What's appealing about this is that it takes responsibility away from followers to think on their own. So a leader at the top may be rewarded for being indispensable. When the leader leaves the company, and his or her department's performance goes down the tubes, it's taken as a sign that he or she was a good leader.

The reality is that, most often, the leader was not very effective in equipping, training and developing people properly.

The problem here is that employees are released from any responsibility of the hard work of thinking, making decisions and being accountable because they're just cogs in a wheel (so they think). Their attitude may be, "Hey, I was only doing what I was told by my boss."

People get comfortable with the idea of being a follower, doing what they're told to do and nothing else.

While a leader-follower culture is still effective, there's a cost to this model over time. People who are treated as followers, you will find, will treat others as followers when it's their turn to lead. In turn, a vast untapped human potential is lost.

In highly effective organizations, there are leaders at every level, not just at the top. The solution is always to push authority down so you're creating a leader-leader culture.

Retired U.S. Navy Capt. David Marquet once commanded the USS Santa Fe, a nuclear-powered submarine. Marquet wrote a brilliant leadership book a few years ago called *Turn the Ship Around*, a true story and case study of how he transformed a ship in a culture of followers by challenging the U.S. Navy's traditional leader-follower approach and pushing for leadership at every level. As a result, the Santa Fe skyrocketed from worst to first in the whole fleet because of his choice to give up control. The crew became fully engaged, contributing their intellectual capacity every day, and the Santa Fe started winning awards left and right and promoting a huge number of officers to submarine command.

The lessons from this case study transfer to any business or position, and the payoff is huge: a happy team where every member is taking responsibility for his or her actions, and where each is a leader. Pay close attention to the do's and don'ts as you assess where you are with your team or work culture.

Question for reflection: Do you have a leader-follower or leader-leader tribe? ■



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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Available online at www.SOA.org/ld.
- ² "To Lead, Create a Shared Vision," by Posner and Kouzes, *Harvard Business Review*, January 2009.