



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

November 2014 – Issue 56

Culture of Personality

By Jamie Shallow

“You gave me fortune. You gave me fame. You gave me power in your God’s name. I’m every person you need to be. I’m the cult of personality.”

OK, flashback to the 1980s. Does this song ring a bell? Yes, it’s the rather well-known song by Living Colour, “*Cult of Personality*.” The Oxford Dictionary defines a cult of personality (or personality cult) as, “*Excessive public admiration for or devotion to a famous person, especially a political leader.*”¹ So what does this have to do with management and personal development?

Well, I’ve been reading a number of books and articles lately that have a similar tone to each other. These include a book that was used for a culture workshop I recently attended—*Winning Teams Winning Cultures* by Larry E. Senn and Jim Hart. In the foreword to the book, Warren Bennis points out that “*Because of the complexity of the issues we face, we need teams of leaders working toward a common purpose. We no longer live in a world in which individual stars can carry the day on their own. To truly succeed, we need high-performance teams and winning cultures.*”²

What I understood here is that the success of an organization is really dependent on the *culture*, not some *cult of personality*. I may be using the term loosely, but it was an interesting word play to me that I thought hit the theme of the statement. The success of a company is dependent on team success and the foundation of the underlying culture—not on any individual superstar.

Then, later in the first chapter, another profound point made the word play even more interesting. The book noted that “*The success of any change is tied to human dynamics (the culture). And yet, most change initiatives continue to focus almost exclusively on the operational, systems and technical side.*”³

So the culture is really the human element, or you might say *personality*—a culture of personality. The

emphasis I drew from this reading, which very well summarized the collection of my recent readings, was the transition of focus from self to others.

Truly, up until the time we become leaders, the focus is very heavily on our ability to stand out—to graduate at the top of the class, to get hired for the job above all others, to be in the top percentage of exam-takers so that we receive a passing score of 6 or better, and to technically perform better than our peers to prove to management that we are deserving of one of the limited number of promotions.

Now, as leader, this really needs to change. To truly be successful at a leadership position, the focus must be on the success of others, and to genuinely establish a culture with an emphasis on human dynamics and team synergy.

No more superstar or *cult of personality*, but rather a *culture of personality*!

LEVEL 5 LEADER

Interestingly, in the business classic, *Good to Great (G2G)*, one major quality of the great organizations is they have what Jim Collins refers to as “Level



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5 Leaders.” The book notes, “*Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders seem to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy—these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar.*”⁴

The study of the book essentially revealed that G2G companies had leaders who are more plow horse than show horse, and they gave credit to others for successes but took the blame for failures. This is the type of leadership you often see from great coaches of winning sports teams. As you can imagine, this type of leadership impacted the entire culture of the organization.

Similarly, Lynn Good, chief executive of Duke Energy, noted the following in a recent interview with Adam Bryant for *The New York Times*, “*With people at this level of their career, it’s no longer about whether you are the smartest subject-matter expert in the room. It’s whether you can be effective in leading a diverse team. Can you adapt? As you think about developing people through their careers, you’re looking for that transition from being the smartest person in the room—and caring so much about that—to being the most effective. It’s about how to develop a team.*”⁵

Again, we see a focus away from showcasing our own technical abilities and increasing our focus on developing the talent of others. What’s also acknowledged is that there is a career point in time where a transition takes place, so there is some change, transformation, and growth that occur. This is a normal process a leader goes through, but it does require mindful attention and effort to achieve that change in vision. I like how Jeanne Lebens puts it in her article on actuarial leadership:

“After twenty or more years of positive reinforcement for being smart and working hard, the formula for success seems obvious to any mathematician. And then the rules abruptly change, and the path to advancement is no longer clear.”⁶

This can be a particularly challenging transition for actuaries, who have been groomed to equate technical expertise with career success. That formula clearly breaks down as the actuary

transitions from skilled professional to leader.

Can you identify the point in your own career where the rules changed? And what have you done to adapt to those changes?

In the next issue, I’ll discuss two other critical aspects of leading through a culture of personality. ●

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Retrieved from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/personality-cult.
- ² Senn, L. E., & Hart, J. 2006. *Winning Teams Winning Cultures*. Long Beach: Leadership Press.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁴ Collins, J. 2001. *Good To Great*. pp. 12-13. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- ⁵ Bryant, A. 2013, Nov. 23. Lynn Good of Duke Energy, on Effective Leaders. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com.
- ⁶ Hollister Lebens, J. (n.d.). *Actuarial Leadership: An Oxymoron ... or a Missed Opportunity*. Retrieved from <http://www.jmlcoaching.com>.