



Demystifying Leadership

A Journey Around the World

By Aisha Faleeldeen

Editor’s note: This article expands on an article originally published in the October/November issue of The Actuary.

“Leading people is the most challenging, and therefore, the most gratifying undertaking of all human endeavors.”

—Jocko Willink, retired U.S. Navy SEAL officer and coauthor of *Extreme Ownership*

There are libraries of books and innumerable sayings by politicians, business executives, sports figures, academics and a myriad of others on the topic of leadership. Some elements of leadership are universal, but:

What does leadership look like within the actuarial field, what are some variables, and what practical advice can we learn?

To explore this subject, actuarial leaders from around the world were questioned to find out what leadership means to them, how they empower their teams and what they believe will be effective leadership styles for the future. The intention was not only to understand what works or is more prevalent in a given region, but also to identify common themes and learn how cultures and traditions across different parts of the world play a vital role in defining effective leadership.

The following professionals participated in interviews for this article:

Carlos Arocha, managing partner, Arocha & Associates (continental Europe)

Dana Barhoumeh, consulting actuary, Milliman Dubai (United Arab Emirates, Asia)



Arpita Das, Life and Disability senior actuary, Allianz Partners (Ireland, Europe)

Alissa Holz, head of Business Development–Australia, RGA (Australia)

Zivanai Mutukwa, head actuary, Liberty Africa Insurance (Africa)

Norio Nihei, AVP, U.S. GAAP, Actuarial and Actuarial Modeling, MetLife Japan (Japan, Asia)

Hans Wagner, chief actuary and chief risk officer, ICBC-AXA Life (China, Asia)

Candace Woods, chief actuary, Prudential Financial (North America)

Alexandre Zuvela, principal, Korn Ferry (South America)

Key themes emerged in the responses of the leaders, which are summarized in this article.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

The “visionary” style of leadership—“let me tell you where we are going as a team”—was the characteristic these professionals noted most often. Visionary leaders help others see how they can contribute to the vision, allowing the whole team to move together toward a shared view of the future. Organizations need a vision, but they also need leaders who can effectively communicate that vision. Employees look to their leaders to provide an image of the future and to clearly articulate their vision and inspire others to join them on the journey.

A directive style, in which leaders set the direction and make the decisions, was more prevalent among leaders interviewed from Asia and South America. This style may be shaped by cultural or societal influences in these regions and countries. For example, Japan is strongly governed by regulatory oversight focused on the needs of the people.

It’s also important to note that appropriate leadership styles are often shaped by who is being led. A style that may work well with a group of senior managers may not work with a group of entry-level workers or new graduates, and effective styles will be different country by country. Leaders must be aware of the various styles at their fingertips, but ultimately, it is up to them to decide what is most effective in their particular situation.

LEADERSHIP IN THE FUTURE

All interviewed for this article said that leadership styles within a business are shaped by organizational culture and regional culture, and change is inevitable. As more information on leadership is shared and cultures across the world become more interconnected, leadership styles will naturally evolve. With an increasingly skilled workforce and dynamic changes in innovation and technology, most said that the visionary style of leadership will be key.

In a future filled with information overload and distractions, a visionary leader requires focus and the ability to stay on the right track. Knowing where to focus will be determined by asking the right questions, narrowing down the possibilities and staying committed to achieving the big picture.

TOP LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

When asked about outstanding leadership qualities, respondents in the Americas and Europe said they would include knowledge of subject matter, intellect, communication, decision making, trust and transparency. Interestingly, leaders in Switzerland reported gaining credibility through their level of punctuality, while those in China and the Middle East cited the level of authority within the organization as the most important attribute in gaining credibility. Leaders in Africa expressed that accountability is one of the most critical traits, while those in Japan expressed the need to empathize and respect old traditions when making changes—and ensure that the changes are gradual.

The ability to influence remains a challenge, but when it is done with patience, tolerance and belief, influential leadership can transcend time.

INFLUENTIAL LEADERSHIP

Providing opportunities for employees to lead and influence remains a work in progress for companies across the globe based on feedback from leaders interviewed for this article, with some additional challenges noted in Asia, Africa and Australia. Companies that encourage ideas from employees at all levels help them to build and increase confidence. Around the world, changing a company’s culture remains challenging; however, this is possible through strong leadership.

In his book *100 Most Influential People in the World*, author Michael H. Hart examines what makes these leaders from the past and present such great influencers. The top three that Hart lists are all spiritual leaders: Prophet Muhammad, Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha. These all shared the traits of patience, leading through actions and, most importantly, belief in the power of what they preached. Through this unyielding perseverance, they were able to move millions of people centuries after their time.

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DIVERSITY AND LEADERSHIP

Diversity and inclusion help bring creative thinking and intelligent solutions to the table, an important consideration that emerged from the conversations with leaders in North America and Europe, and one that is still evolving in South America. Almost all leaders around the world recognized that diverse teams produce better solutions to complex problems.

Building multicultural competencies within an organization creates greater financial returns. A 2018 McKinsey report examined more than 1,000 companies across 12 countries spanning various industries and businesses.¹ Those with executive teams in the bottom quartile for both gender diversity and racial and ethnic diversity were 29 percent less likely to achieve above-average profitability. This demonstrates a correlation between the opportunities for large financial gains and companies that prioritize diversity in leadership.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS NEEDED FOR THE FUTURE

As the actuarial field continues to change and transform, leaders expect the visionary and coaching styles to become more prevalent. Along with these, it is important for leaders to reflect, learn from success and failures, understand what they would do differently and identify what improvements could be made.

One critical aspect of leadership that will help the actuarial profession in the future is communication. As most leaders eluded to, communicating clearly what their vision is for the organization and communicating frequently to assess progress are crucial. In addition, the North American leaders stressed the importance of understanding different cultures to communicate the right message to the right audience. It is especially important when dealing with international business partners, as cultures, tone and body language play a critical role in delivering the appropriate message.

All of the leaders interviewed said that as technologies evolve, people move and the actuarial profession transforms, actuaries need to be cognizant of different cultures and diversity, not only in one country, but around the world. The most successful lead-

ers not only understand and are aware of their audience but are also adept at adjusting their style to their audience's culture and traditions. Deciding what works best for the environment and composition of their teams is a critical skill for actuarial leaders, both now and in the future. ■

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ENDNOTE

- 1 Hunt, Vivian, Lareina Yee, Sara Prince, and Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle. *Delivering Through Diversity*. McKinsey & Company, January 18, 2018, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity> (accessed May 20, 2020).



Body Talk

By Mitchell Stephenson

In the 1960s, Dr. Albert Mehrabian released two studies on communication.^{1,2} He found that there are three important elements of communication: (1) body language, (2) tone of voice, and (3) spoken words. When all three are consistent, people listen to the words. When they are not consistent, people place far more attention—**55 percent**—on body language than they do on spoken words—only 7 percent.

Making sure that your body language sends the message that you want takes work. This article offers some tips to maximize the impact of your body language.

BE AWARE OF YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

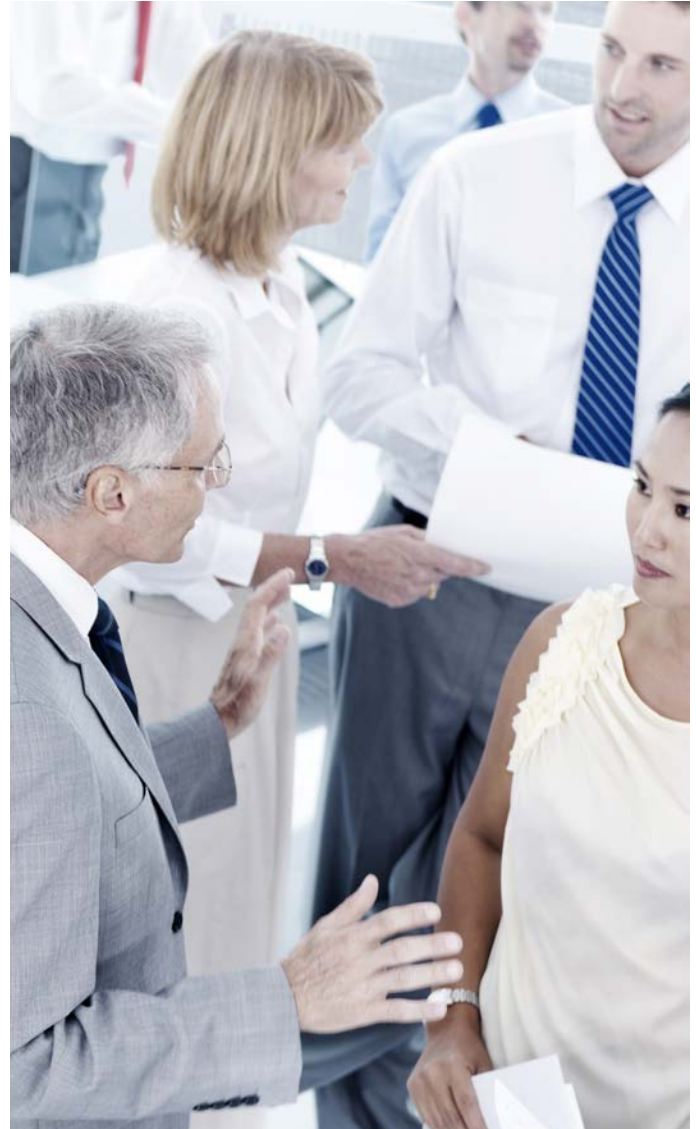
Hall of fame basketball coach Pat Summitt said, “We communicate all the time, even when we don’t realize it. Be aware of body language.”³ It’s important to always remember this.

For example, to give your audience confidence that you are open-minded and receptive, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, shoulders back, and head up, and make eye contact when someone is speaking with you. This will encourage your audience to be more honest and forthcoming.

Doing the converse—crossing your arms and tilting your head sideways when someone is speaking with you—will likely give the impression that you are close-minded and not receptive, whether you intend it or not. Simply **being aware** of your body language will help you to adjust and correct it, to have the desired effect on the interaction.

LEARN FROM OTHERS

If you see someone exhibiting body language that you want to emulate, copy it. You may feel like an imposter for a while, but



if it works for you, it will become part of your normal gestures and will feel more natural. If it doesn’t work, you will simply stop using it.

The key is being willing to take a risk and feel awkward while trying something new. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy sums it up nicely in her TED Talk *Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are*: “Don’t fake it ’til you make it. Fake it ’til you become it.”⁴

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

It is important to practice a process in which you seek to replace negative body language with positive. For example, having an open, upright posture in a meeting will signal attentiveness and alertness. If you naturally slouch, it will take time to change your habit. In a 2009 University College London study,⁵ researchers found that forming a new habit can take anywhere from 18 to 254 days. Whether on the short or long end of the time spectrum, it simply takes practice and perseverance to make a change in your body language permanent.

If you remember to focus on, seek to improve and change your body language so that it sends the signals you intend, it can have a profound impact on your interactions with others. This is true for your interactions in both a professional and a personal setting. No matter how carefully you choose what you say, give just as much consideration to how you communicate it. Heed the words of comedian Ricky Gervais, who said, “Body language is more powerful than words.”⁶ ■



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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Mehrabian, Albert, and Susan R. Ferris. 1967. Inference of Attitudes From Non-verbal Communication in Two Channels. *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 31, no. 3:248–252.
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- 6 Ghost Town—Ricky Gervais Interview. Interview with Rob Carnevale. *IndieLondon*. n.d. <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/ghost-town-ricky-gervais-interview> (accessed May 15, 2020).



Executive Dysfunction

By Kelly Rabin

Have you ever seen a tweet or meme that completely hit home? One popped up for me the other day that had been tweeted by @A_Silent_Child and shared on Facebook by The ADHD Gift:

Executive Dysfunction looks like:

I sit down to do my homework. I decide I need water first. I go get water. While I'm drinking water I realize I haven't had breakfast. I stick toast in the toaster. I go to the restroom. I decide the dishwasher needs to be unloaded.

I unload three dishes, then notice dust on the floor. I sweep the entire floor. I notice the clean clothes hamper. I put away a pair of socks. While I'm putting away the socks I see my medication and remember I need to take it. I need food to do that. My toast is now cold.

I put it back in to warm. I remember I was supposed to do homework. I debate for the next 30 seconds if I should start now or after my toast is done. Then my toast is done. I spend the next 30 min eating. And then it's been two hours and I still haven't done any homework.

About halfway through reading this I realized that my life can at times bear some resemblance to Laura Numeroff's children's book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. Yet I'm a successful, competent professional. Here are some tips I have learned along the way that may be useful to you.

1. WRITE IT DOWN

You must make lists. I learned in a time management course a few years ago that it is better to have one master list for all things in your life, vs. one for work, one for home, and so on. I keep an "all-in to-do list" in a note on my cellphone. I have separate sections for home, work and volunteer activities, but it's still all in one document so that I can easily skim what I need to do. If



something pops into my head as a need-to-do, I quickly add it to the list. If something has a due date, I note that too. I'm sure there are fancier, app-based solutions for this, but this works for me because it's quick and simple. Otherwise, I can easily get sucked into the black hole of spending all my time getting perfectly organized.

2. PLAN YOUR DAY

At the start of each day, I look at my list and decide which items I am planning to work on that day. It's important to do this so that you are able to move items forward that are important but not urgent. Otherwise, you are likely to bounce from email to email and not move forward on tasks that require more creativity or longer focus (such as writing this article!). Schedule times for work on your calendar and specifically identify which tasks you are going to work on at those times.

3. DON'T LET EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STEAL ALL YOUR PRECIOUS TIME

Skim your email throughout the day for urgent items if you're in a role where that's the expectation (I try not to let client emails sit unread all day), but avoid reading and responding to most messages until a scheduled time if you can. I use my email software to flag emails that need responses or actions, and then I add them to my to-do list so that I don't let them slip through the cracks. I also filter on flagged items at least once a week to make sure I haven't missed something. I save social media for times when I need a brain break, but I set an alarm. This keeps me from finding myself still scrolling hours later.

4. GIVE YOUR BRAIN A LITTLE DISTRACTION

Sometimes when I am trying to focus on something, the endless chatter in my brain about all the other things I need or want to be doing can be challenging. I find that listening to music through headphones can help, but it has to be the right kind of music—nothing that will get me too sucked in! Various music streaming services offer playlists to encourage focus; those have been my go-to lately.

5. FIND AN ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNER

Is there someone in your life to whom you can report out and talk through challenges? I have a coach I use for this purpose, but it could easily be a spouse, coworker or friend.

If your accountability partner is not a professional, I find it's helpful if it's someone who also could benefit from accountability. If your partner is someone to whom this all comes really easily, they are likely going to get frustrated with you and not understand why you can't "just do it." Professional therapy may also be helpful, even just a session through your company's employee assistance program, to help you develop tactics tailored to your needs.

6. DON'T LET PERFECT BE THE ENEMY OF GOOD

Most actuaries do high-quality work by nature, and the challenge is to turn off the perfectionistic tendencies that hold us back from even getting started. When I get stuck and it's hard to put pen to paper (or hands to keyboard, as it were), I like to use my phone's talk-to-text capabilities so I can get my ideas out of my head into a format I can work with. It's also important to think through your priorities. Which is worse, missing that deadline or handing in work that is B quality vs. the A-plus you

might prefer? Odds are, your stakeholders will have input for you to incorporate, so you are better off sharing a draft earlier in the process anyway. Give people something to react to.

7. WHEN DISTRACTED, BEGIN AGAIN

In the course of writing this article, my children have interrupted me at least three times (thank you very much, COVID-19 homeschooling). I used to get really worked up and frustrated when I would lose my precious focus, but the truth is, distractions are going to happen. Your boss may stop by your desk with a question. You may be in and out of meetings all day. The better you can get at resetting yourself and turning your mind back to the task at hand, the more productive you will be. It's just another form of mindfulness practice. I actually picture in my mind my eyes turning away from looking out the window back to my computer screen. It gets easier the more you do it.

8. GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

You are amazing and you can do this. Executive dysfunction may be your kryptonite at times, but you have other superpowers. I excel at keeping many balls in the air because my brain wants to do it all—I just have to harness that energy. Catch yourself doing something right. Celebrate checking that item off your to-do list, no matter how small. It's all about building mastery.

For the times when it isn't going well (because it won't always), learn to laugh at yourself. Learning that the challenges I've had my whole life actually have a name and that a lot of other smart people struggle too has helped me. When I find my life resembling the earlier tweet (most recent example being forgetting about piles of laundry because my husband asked me a question about our Hello Fresh delivery), being able to shake my head and say "Yup, there's that executive dysfunction again" helps me accept what is and move on to problem solving, rather than beating myself up about my deficiencies. Shame is not a solution!

Have a particular situation where executive dysfunction is tripping you up? I'm happy to be your sounding board. Email me at kelly@rabinadvisors.com. ■



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LEADERSHIP & DEVELOPMENT SECTION HIGHLIGHTS

Look to the L&D section for all your leadership needs



SECTION COMMUNITY

To celebrate National Volunteer Week, the SOA has developed the [Volunteer Community Web Series](#) where volunteers interview each other about why they donate their time, knowledge and passion, and how they are making an impact on the actuarial profession and society. Tune in to hear stories from volunteers across the SOA, including two of our very own, Amanda Hug and Kelly Rabin.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Join us for the [Extreme Leadership Webcast](#) taking place on June 30, 2020, from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. EDT to hear life experiences and leadership lessons learned from two former public servants who are accomplished leaders from two diverse professions. The presenters will discuss the differences and similarities in leading people during stressful situations in two very public professions—the military and law enforcement.

Get access to more info at SOA.org/sections/leadership-development