Ordinary People, Extraordinary Results

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Leaders who model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge processes and care about others can get extraordinary things done.

Conventional wisdom portrays leadership as something found mostly at the top. Myth and legend treat it as if it were the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. Nothing is further from the truth. Leadership is not a birthright.

That’s the inescapable conclusion from case studies of thousands of personal best leadership experiences and several million surveys. Leadership is not about who someone is or where he or she comes from. It’s about what a person does. A leader’s behavior explains why people feel engaged and positive about their workplaces. Empirically, how constituents view their leaders’ behaviors explains more than 100 times the amount of variance accounted for by any particular individual or organizational characteristic.

Leadership is not the exclusive blessing of a few select individuals, nor is it about position, title, power, authority, celebrity or wealth. It’s not about being a CEO, president, general, prime minister or superstar. And it’s most assuredly not about some charismatic gift.

Ordinary people who lead others along pioneering journeys follow similar paths. Though each experience is unique in its particulars, cases often follow comparable patterns. Getting extraordinary things done means engaging in the following five leadership practices:

- Model the way.
- Inspire a shared vision.
- Challenge the process.
- Enable others to act.
- Encourage the heart.

Leadership is an identifiable set of skills and abilities available to anyone. It can be learned, and the best leaders are the best learners.

ON THE WEB

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Model the Way

Olivia Lai, senior marketing associate at Moody’s Analytics in Hong Kong, said when reflecting on her personal best leadership experience she realized “that leadership is everywhere, it takes place every day, and leadership can come from anyone. It doesn’t matter that you don’t have the title of manager, director or CEO to go with it. It’s how you behave that makes a difference.”

Exemplary leaders know if they want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, they must model the behavior they expect from others. To effectively model behavior, that individual must be clear about his or her own guiding principles.

“In order for me to become a leader, it’s important that I first define my values and principles. If I don’t know what my own values are and determine expectations for myself, how can I set expectations for others?” Lai said.

Leaders have to find their own voice, and give voice to their values. They are expected to stand up for their beliefs, so they’d better have some beliefs to stand up for. However, eloquent speeches about common values aren’t sufficient. Actions are far more important than words when constituents want to determine how serious leaders really are about what they say. Exemplary leaders set the example through their daily actions, demonstrating deep commitment to their beliefs, and ideally this should be done every day in plain view of those expected to follow the values.
Inspire a Shared Vision

People often describe their personal best leadership experiences as times when they imagined an exciting, highly attractive future for their organization. They had visions and dreams of what could be, and this became a magnetic pull to the future. Focusing on the future sets leaders apart from those who mainly focus on the present. “Vision trumps everything,” said Nancy Zimpher, chancellor of the State University of New York. “Organizations are most effective when a well-articulated and ambitious vision of the future exists.”

But exemplary leaders know they can’t command commitment; they have to inspire it by enlisting others in a common vision. Buddy Blanton, a programs manager in strategy and development at Northrop Grumman Corp., said when he wanted to learn how he could be more effective at creating a shared vision he asked his team for feedback. What they told him helped him understand that it’s the process, not just the vision, that’s critical to get all people on the same page. They said: “You would benefit by helping us, as a team, to understand how you got to your vision. We want to walk with you while you create the goals and vision so we all get to the end vision together,” he said. Further, he said this experience helped him to realize that unity of purpose is forged by showing constituents how the dream leads to the common good.
Challenge the Process

Challenge is a crucible for greatness. At least, that’s what Katherine Winkel, marketing communications coordinator at Monsanto, said she observed when discussing her peers’ personal best leadership experiences. “The similarity that most stuck out in my mind was that in each story the person described having to overcome uncertainty and fear in order to achieve their best.”

Most personal best leadership cases senior-level talent leaders are likely to run across involve a change from the status quo. It’s highly unlikely that someone sat idly waiting for fate to smile upon them. Leaders search for opportunities to innovate, grow and improve.

Innovation comes more from listening than from telling, so leaders should constantly look outside of themselves and their organizations for clues about what’s new or different, and what possibilities others are not seeing. As CEO of Bay Area Credit Services, Michael Priest said he learned firsthand that leaders must look outward for fresh ideas. “Sometimes you just can’t predict where the change will come from,” he said, “but you have to have your eyes wide open if you have any hope of even catching a glimpse of it.”

Exemplary leaders also experiment and take risks. They aren’t content with the status quo. But sometimes people are reluctant to take big risks, so one way leaders deal with the potential failures of experimentation is to approach change through incremental steps, small wins and continuous learning.

When Venkat Dokiparthi was asked to lead a technical development team in India, he said he realized that “I needed to break down the task and make it simple for them to feel successful.” The process of small wins can catapult leaders and their teams forward, and motivate their continued forward momentum even when times get tough. Leaders need to show others they can make something happen, and doing so often provides a great boost in their confidence.

Enable Others to Act

No leader ever got anything extraordinary done by working alone. Grand dreams don’t become significant realities through a single person’s actions. “No matter how capable a leader is, he or she alone won’t be able to deliver a large project or program without the joint efforts and synergies that come from the team,” said Eric Pan, regional head of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants in South China.

Leaders foster collaboration and build trust by engaging all those who must make a project work, and in some way, all who must live with the results. That was the first order of business for Jill Cleveland when she became finance manager at Apple Inc. “I had to learn how to trust my employees,” she said. “I understood that in order for my employees, and thus myself, to be successful I needed to learn to develop a cohesive and collaborative team, beginning with trust as the framework.” Cleveland said she realized when people are trusted and have more discretion, more authority and more information, they’re much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results.

Encourage the Heart

In climbing to the top people can become exhausted, frustrated and disenchanted, and are often tempted to give up. Genuine acts of caring uplift the spirits to carry on and draw people forward. Hilary Hall, pricing and sales finance manager at Bloomberg, said a “great leader has to work to maintain a high-performing environment and celebrate employees’ contributions and achievements.” Further, she said an essential component of building such an environment “is developing a robust rewards and recognition program that motivates employees and — most importantly — builds a community of trust that will be the foundation for future organizational successes.”

Recognizing contributions can be done one-to-one or with many people. It can come from dramatic gestures or simple actions. Jason Cha, from Tyco Electronics, said “Recognizing and rewarding individual contributions was one of the most effective ways to keep people focused and to foster innovation. Team members feel appreciated, and being recognized raises [an] individual’s commitment to excellence because his or her name is associated with a given project. It also creates a sense of community in that people feel they are part of a winning team.”

Leaders show appreciation for people’s contributions and create a culture that celebrates both values and victories. Celebrations and rituals, when done with authenticity and from the heart, can build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through tough times.

When everyday leaders are doing their best they model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart. Further, the more they engage in these practices the more likely it is that they will get extraordinary things done on a regular basis.

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