

Score the Rainbow's Pot of Gold:
Be the Leader No One Wants to Leave

By
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Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.

Peter Drucker

Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned on the seat belt sign. Please return to your seats and make sure your seatbelt is fastened tightly around you. We are encountering some unexpected turbulence. I have no idea what that turbulence will be, the source of it, the cause of it, or the cure for it. But I can guarantee it will come. And like the captain of a 747, your job as the boss, will be to make decisions that help all those on board with you navigate the sometimes unfriendly and uncharted skies of your particular industry. You will make decisions that affect you, but more importantly, you will make decisions that will affect many, possibly thousands of other people. That's what bosses do. They take charge in turbulent time.

Why would anyone want to be led by you? That's the question that needs to frame your journey to better leadership. If you have a hard time answering that one, try this one, "Would you want you for a boss?" When someone answers with an awkward silence or a stare similar to a dog watching a ceiling fan, you can infer that the answer is "no." The next questions are, "What makes you think others want you for their boss?" and "What are you doing that you wouldn't want your boss to do?" As simple as the exercise is, it is eye opening in almost every case.

To score a leader's version of the rainbow's pot of gold, you'll need to rouse others with confidence in you and inspire them with assurance in themselves. Lou Holtz, famed Notre Dame football coach, captured the essence of this daunting task in three questions that he speculated people always ask about their leaders:

Are you committed to excellence?

Can I trust you?

Do you care about me?

There are many myths about great leadership and just as many pieces of advice to match them. But Lou Holtz's questions make it all very simple. Can your direct reports answer "yes" to all three?

Are You Committed To Excellence?

People want to play on a winning team, and most realize that hard work and sacrifice make a team win. Football players suit up to practice in the 100 degree temperatures of August not because they like it, but because they know it is part of attaining excellence. Your direct reports are no different. They expect you to demand what it takes to separate your company from the competition.

During his tenure on the speaking circuit, Lou Holtz told stories of inspiring his team by saying that he had called the coach at the University of Michigan to see if he would agree to easy practices for his players so that the Notre Dame players could take it easy that day. Their coach said he wouldn't agree, so he couldn't let them off easy either. As he explained, if the competition is doing it, we have to do it if we are going to beat them in the opening game of the season.

From the time we are children, we understand that excellence requires hard work. People won't grouse about it if they think you are really striving for superiority. What is the essence of excellence? Leo Tolstoy wrote "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," an observation that is probably applicable to top performers too. Successful bosses are all alike in how they commit themselves to the pursuit of excellence by committing to their own improvement, an ongoing and never ending quest to attain new levels of achievement.

The single worst thing that can happen to cause you to cease being excellent is that you will exhaust your intellectual capital and reach your level of incompetence. Early in your career you dedicated yourself to learning, growing, and experiencing. Now, you are bogged down in the perpetual challenges of getting results. Stephen Covey talked about the successful wood cutter taking time to sharpen his saw. Trying to cut with a dull saw keeps you in motion and lets others know you are busy and dedicated, but

it's not the smartest way to operate. You become so busy *doing* that you forget about *learning*, the intellectual equivalent to sharpening the saw. You need to learn faster now, so take the time to learn how to learn. It can pay enormous dividends.

The first step is to gather relevant information about yourself. You probably already know most of your strengths and weaknesses, but knowing what others think they are can be truly eye opening. One of the best ways to find out is to ask. That can take several forms, but probably one of the most effective is the multi-rater 360 instrument. A well-crafted survey will capture the opinions of direct reports, peers, and your boss, if you have one. Once you understand what their perceptions are, you will be able to take steps to improve in ways that *they* think you should. The experience is usually both educational and beneficial. Once you know how your behavior affects your team's productivity, you will be equipped to make changes and to offer more coaching, all important first steps for building trust.

Can I Trust You?

Once your direct reports are sure that you are committed to personal and organizational excellence, they will want to know if they can trust you. This particular question is, "Can I, your direct report, whose future, job satisfaction, and livelihood depend on your good judgment, trust you?" The answer needs to be "Yes. You can trust me to be open when I can be, to be honest and ethical all the time, to be predictable when I can be, and to admit my mistakes." Nobody is perfect, and nobody gets it right the first time or every time after that. Your direct reports know you aren't perfect, they just don't tell you that they know.

When you try to cover your mistakes, pretend they didn't happen, or worse yet, blame them on someone else, you can forget about sustaining, much less building trust for a long, long time. Winston Churchill said it best: "Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm." Churchill is a name that lives on because of his successes, but those who know history understand that he was not without his fiascos or his critics. You won't be either; it's just one of those nasty realities of being in charge.

Do You Care About Me?

The word “coach” is used throughout leadership books, and indeed has been used throughout this discussion. There’s little argument that a great boss also needs to be a great coach. But an under represented concept is the boss’s role as cheerleader, the person who strives to rally enthusiasm and energy so that the team can play on, even when encountering a tougher team in a dirty fight. Observe the coaches on the sidelines of any high stakes competition. Is there much difference between them and the cheerleaders? The cheerleaders jump more and wear cuter clothes, but they are fundamentally doing the same thing. Like an animated cheerleader, the job of the boss is to be the Energizer Bunny for your direct reports. It’s the boss’s duty to be the power source that others know they can rely on. What if you don’t feel energetic? Fake it.

For so many decades organizational research has been dominated by a desire to understand and ameliorate human dysfunction and problems in the workplace. The emphasis was on motivating disgruntled employees, improving dysfunctional attitudes, overcoming resistance to change, and coping with stress and burnout. Positive emotions, such as hope, were largely ignored. Hope is an attribute that hasn’t traditionally been associated with leadership, but with recent work on the subject, new ways of understanding it are receiving attention. The research results indicated that “high hope” leaders had significantly better financial performance, subordinate retention, and satisfaction scores than the “low hope” participants.

Hope has two dimensions: *willpower*, or the desire to have a positive outcome, and *waypower*, the willingness to do what it takes to make constructive things occur. High hope individuals tend to be more certain about their goals and challenged by them. They value progress toward objectives as well as the objectives themselves. They enjoy interacting with others and readily adapt to new and collaborative relationships; they are less anxious in stressful situation; and they are more adaptive to environmental changes.

Instilling hope in your direct reports is one of the single most important gifts you can give them; it doesn’t cost a thing; and anyone can give it at any time in any set of circumstances. Here are three suggestions:

1. Facilitate the *willpower* component of hope by engaging your direct reports in discussions and empowering them to set specific stretch goals. Communicate your own faith in them so that they can develop their own “can do” attitude.

2. Assist them in developing the *waypower* component by requiring well-developed action plans for achieving goals.
3. Act as a sounding board for their thoughts, but instead of shooting holes in their ideas, guide them to their own conclusions by asking open ended questions that encourage them to analyze more fully implications of their decisions.

Accomplishing some objectives can seem a little like trying to eat an elephant. The task is huge and the feelings of accomplishment much removed from current efforts to complete it. Therefore, your direct reports may need for you to break down complex, long-term projects into smaller tasks with a deadline for each “step” along the way. Accomplishing each step then builds hope that the next step and the one after that will also be attainable, with the ultimate realization of the objective becoming more realistic with each achievement.

Showing that you care about your direct reports through hope taps a type of positive thinking and action in people that is significantly related to important workplace outcomes. Stimulating the desire to achieve objectives, *willpower* and facilitating the discovery of paths to achieving the goals, *waypower*, leads to positive personal and performance outcomes.

Conclusion

Chances are, no matter how hard you try, you won't be a leader who will be remembered in the history books. Your name won't be uttered in the same breath as Churchill, Ghandi, Eisenhower, or even Lou Holtz. People won't write books decades from now and include your quotes, neither will most remember you at all. That only happens to a handful of people who are blessed or cursed with circumstances and characteristics that coalesce in the right combinations during the exact times they are needed, with too many moving parts and variables to control.

Perhaps you don't have discretionary power to allocate large sums of money to developing all the ideas that you have, but you do have governance over your own behaviors. You can begin with one or two goals that will make small but important moves in the right direction. For instance, you can commit to better listening; you can

pledge to others that you will increase the number of performance management conversations you have throughout the year; you can promise to hold better meetings; you can give you word that you will take steps to know your direct reports better so that you understand their strengths and can help to build their hope for the future. Not one of these costs money, yet any one will help you take important steps toward causing your direct reports to answer “yes” to Lou Holtz’s three questions and to becoming the boss that no one wants to leave. So, put on your own oxygen mask first and lead the way to the rainbow’s pot of gold.

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