

LEADERSHIP ESSENTIALS FOR COMPLICATED TIMES

Bill Treasurer

These are exceptionally complicated times to be a leader. The world is fraught with political divisions, economic gyrations, generational tensions, racial disharmonies, and exhausting pandemic realities. More leaders are having to lead remote teams across larger geographic distances, presenting unique challenges in terms of onboarding new employees, providing performance feedback, and building team *esprit de corps*. In the past, leaders provided stability through consistently applied standards, practices, and processes. Now individual exceptions are the rule. Today's leaders are increasingly having to use a bespoke leadership approach, tailoring individualized work arrangements to flexibly accommodate each person's extenuating life realities. As a result, a leader may be seen as exceedingly fair or unfair, depending on who benefits from the policy exceptions. Letting one person work remotely to care for an aging immunocompromised parent will look like enlightened

leadership to the caretaking worker. But it may smack of favoritism to the healthy single person who is required to be onsite every day.

Today's realities are heaped on top of a role that has always been uniquely challenging. The expectations many people have of their leaders have always been conflicting, inflated, and unrealistic. They want leaders to provide high-level vision and be strategic, yet they also want them to be intensely operational and tactical. They want leaders to be decisive and work with urgency, yet they also want them to be inclusive and involve the voices of everyone. They want leaders to innovate and experiment by taking bold risks, yet they also want those risks to be minimized, mitigated, and controlled. They want leaders to be intellectually smart, yet also to be attuned to their own emotions and the emotions of others. They want leaders who are tough and hold people accountable, yet who

are compassionate and foster psychological safety. They want leaders who exude confidence and self-assuredness, yet are grounded, authentic, and humble. It's a lot to ask for.

Given the challenges facing leaders at this moment in history, they may find themselves struggling to be effective, have influence, make a difference, or add value ... which can take the joy out of leading.

Faced with such struggles, leaders may be tempted to search for newfangled leadership models and approaches as the solution. But *new* doesn't equate to *better*. Often new isn't even new. Remote leadership, for example, may seem like a new topic to leaders who experienced it for the first time during the pandemic, but strategies for leading remote teams have been known since at least the early 2000s and the advent of offshore outsourcing. Project leaders in the U.S. suddenly had to learn how to lead teams of call center and Information Technology/IT workers in India, the Philippines, and other distant lands.

Rather than look for novel approaches to leading during turbulent times, leaders would do well to get back to the timeless essentials of leadership. In nearly all fields and endeavors, mastering the fundamentals is a precursor to contending with increasingly complex and complicated situations. Leaders would do well to consider, for example, the sport of springboard diving where tricks with the highest degrees of difficulty are built on five fundamental dives: the forward, backward, reverse, inward, and twist dives. Divers refer to these basic dives as "requireds," and mastering them is how divers achieve more difficult arial acrobatic feats. I share this lesson from experience. I attended college

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on a diving scholarship and later traveled around the world as a professional high diver. The hardest dive in my repertoire, and the one with the highest degree of difficulty, was a reverse 1 ½ somersault with 2 ½ twists on the 1-meter springboard. I never would have been able to attempt such an acrobatic whirlwind had I not first mastered the reverse dive.

Over the course of 30 years, I have had the good fortune to have worked with thousands of leaders in all sorts of public, private, for-profit, and nonprofit organizations. I've designed, developed, and delivered leadership programs for emerging and experienced leaders alike, and spent thousands of hours in one-on-one executive coaching conversations. I've journeyed with many leaders who initially floundered and eventually flourished. They have taught me a lot about the "requireds" of leadership. Many of the lessons that they have taught me have found their way into my leadership books, including my newest, *Leadership Two Words at a Time: Simple Truths for Leading Complicated People*.

Over time, I've noticed that the most successful leaders, and the ones who most enjoy serving in a leadership role, are those who pay less attention to judging themselves against the ever-shifting barometers of other people's expectations, and instead, focus on the basic fundamentals of effective leadership. The more intense, perplexing, and complicated the challenges facing these leaders, the more they rely on these foundational leadership stabilizers (i.e., "requireds"), most of which fit within two broad areas: 1. Leading Yourself and 2. Leading Others.

Leading Yourself Before you can become qualified to lead others, you've got to lead yourself really well. You've got to know what you're good at, and what you'd be wise to hand off to others. You've got to have a deep value system that can help you weather tough situations. You've got to have a rightsized ego that isn't threatened by honest feedback or disagreement. You've got to practice self-care to keep from becoming self-neglectful or boiling over with stress. You've got to manage and prioritize your time. If you can't lead yourself, what qualifies you to lead others? Here are some of the "requireds" for leading yourself well:

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others?*

Know Thyself: Leadership starts with self-evaluation and self-awareness. You'll do a lot of damage if you are self-oblivious and have no idea who you are. It's important to know what motivates, energizes, and captivates you ... and what doesn't. It's important to identify the formative experiences that helped shape your beliefs about leadership. Who were your earliest leadership role models? What did you learn by watching them? It's important to get clear about why you want to lead and why you think others will follow your leadership. Finally, wherever you are on your leadership journey, it's important to know the outcomes you hope to achieve when the journey nears its end. What difference do you hope to make through your leadership agency and influence?

Value Values: Situations shift. Emergencies arise. Everything seems designed to knock you off center. That will be much harder to do, though, if you in fact have a center. Effective leadership requires having a strong inner core. You've got to be comfortable in your own skin, able to withstand setbacks, and composed when others are becoming temperamental.

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leadership role models?*

It is important to identify the principles you are committed to faithfully upholding. What do you fully endorse, get behind, and stand for? What are the deep values that you profess to be all about? How well are you living those values today, and what can you do to embody them more fully each day? Values provide ballast and stability during the headwinds that you will inevitably face when you're in a leadership role.

Sunshine and Shadows: A lot of emphasis has been placed on working toward people's strengths. Fair enough. But strengths beyond a certain point start to cast a shadow. A leader with a piercing intellect might spend too much time drilling holes into the thinking of their colleagues, embarrassing them in the process. A leader with a creative imagination might spawn too many ideas that are untethered from practical application. A leader who is a great presenter and is comfortable speaking to large groups may start to hog the limelight. You need to do more than just identify your strengths; you need to be clear about the shadows that get cast when your strengths are overused. You might find it useful to list out your strengths on one side of a piece of paper and then list the shadows that those strengths cast when overused. Weaknesses are often overused strengths.

Practice Self-care: Practicing self-care is the best way of demonstrating self-respect. Leaders are often under a lot of unrelenting pressure. They commonly find themselves overworked and under-supported for unreasonable amounts of time. I call this common leader malady *redlining*—when a leader's physical and mental engines are revving into the redzone. It's unhealthy and dangerous. Being a successful leader shouldn't come at the expense of your own health and well-being. Be sure to devote time assessing and managing your stress. Dr. Henry L. Thompson, an expert on extreme leadership and the author of *The Stress Effect: Why Smart Leaders Make Dumb Decisions—And What to Do About It*, advises leaders to attend to seven areas of self-care: Awareness, Rest, Support, Exercise, Nutrition, Attitude, and continuous Learning. He sums it up with an easy to remember acronym: ARSENAL.

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Cultivate Composure: To be sure, you *will* get frustrated when you're in a leadership role. Your frustration will run particularly high when progress and production slow down, when profits tank, or when people aren't performing as you expect them to. But being a quick-tempered hothead serves no one well. When you freak-out, people will lose confidence in you. Worse, they'll start freaking out too. During challenging times especially, it's important for you to remain composed and reasonable. It will be easier to do that if you start your day with some sanity. Consider adopting a practice of easing into your day with some quiet reflection. There are many great daily reflection books with a single page of wisdom to consider as you start your day. At the very least, consider bookending your day with these two perspective-setting questions: What good do I want to do in the world today? What good have I done in the world today?

Leading Others Your success as a leader is contingent upon how successful you help others to be. You can't, and shouldn't, do everything yourself. Your focus should be on helping each individual you work with to add more value by building their skills, competence, and confidence. As their professionalism grows, so too does the value they are able to contribute to the organization. The more value everyone adds, the more valuable the organization becomes. How do you help people add more value? By genuinely valuing them. Invest time in their development. Solicit their input. Give them your focused attention. And draw out the leader in them through your coaching and feedback. Here's are some other requireds for Leading Others:

Earn Trust: Trust bonds followers with leaders and developing trust is one of your primary leadership

responsibilities. Rather than folding your arms and waiting for people to "prove" that you can trust them, spend your time building that trust. Every week or two, you should invest a minimum of 15 minutes with each person who directly reports to you (regardless of whether they are working remotely or onsite). The emphasis should be on building human connection. The time you share with them should have zero to do with checking on the status of projects or tasks. It's NOT about productivity or advancing work goals. Rather, it's about building trust by asking questions like: How are things going outside of work? How are things on the home front? What's most important to you right now? What can I do to be more supportive of you? The 15 connected minutes you devote to them will dramatically strengthen the relationship and build mutual respect and loyalty. People need to know that they're not invisible and that you see them as fellow human beings who want to do their best.

Create Safety: Safety and risk-taking have a clear and important connection. Namely, that people will experiment, innovate, and take risks if you make it *safe* to do so. The work of esteemed Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson is instructive on this point. Her research shows that psychological safety is every bit as important as physical safety when it comes to fully engaging employees. As a leader, your goal should be to create an environment where people are encouraged to share good and bad news freely and without fear. First consider your own "Do Over Moments" —times when you were short-fused or heavy-handed. What would you do differently were you to live the moment again? Next, acknowledge when you may have behaved in ways that made people feel afraid or unsafe around you. Be clear about the actions you're taking to make events like that very rare. Finally, give people explicit permission to be honest with you. Coaching them on how to share upward feedback with you, or disagree with you, in a way that won't trigger your defensiveness or anger.

Team Building: In the same way that it's important to give one's car a periodic tune-up to keep it running well, it's important for leaders and teams to periodically let off some steam together and enjoy each other's

company. If you neglect this, you'll get diminishing returns on output and performance. The team building options are literally endless. I've seen leaders bond with their teams by hiking in the outdoors, taking cooking lessons, go hot-air ballooning, attending sporting events, and even throwing hatchets together! Note: leading a remote team is not a legitimate excuse for forgoing teambuilding. Do an internet search of the term "remote team building activities" and you will literally find hundreds of millions of hits. What matters is that you and the people you're leading step out of your work identities and into your regular people selves. As a leader, people need to see that you aren't one dimensional and that you aren't "all work all the time."

Promote Inclusion: If you care about great results, you'll promote diversity, equity, and inclusion/DEI. Your job is to foster an environment where every single person can bring their full selves to work and be totally engaged. They won't be able to do that if they believe you favor people who look like, talk like, and think like you. Every single person who works with you wants to know that you'll treat them respectfully and fairly, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, hair color, fashion preferences, food choices, birthplace, etc. Don't surround yourself with replicates and clones. DEI expert and Senior Partner of inQUEST Consulting Gloria Cotton suggests that there are six essentials that every human desires and deserves across all cultures: to be *welcomed, valued, respected, heard, understood, and supported*. There is no "them." It's only us.

Conclusion

Leaders are judged by the results they get. The whole point of leadership is to produce positive outcomes that didn't exist before. Your effectiveness as a leader, and the overall performance of your team, will be judged based on the results you deliver. This will remain true regardless of how perplexing or unprecedented the times in which you are leading. Leadership is hard, but it doesn't have to be complicated. Getting back

to the foundational essentials that comprise Leading Yourself and Leading Others will go a long way toward ensuring excellent individual and team performance even in the most challenging times. Relying on the required of Leading Yourself and Leading Others will do something else too: help you enjoy leading again.

This article is adapted from the book *Two Words at a Time: Simple Truths for Leading Complicated People* by Bill Treasurer (Berrett-Koehler, 2022).

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