

Crack the Code

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While **we live in a** world of constant change, one constant over time has been that the state of leadership is poor. Leadership effectiveness is mired in mediocrity. The Ketchum Communications Leadership Monitor found that only 23% believe their leaders are leading well, and only 31% believe leaders communicate well. At the same time, we don't expect it to change only 17% of people have confidence that leadership will improve in the upcoming year.

Ketchum's findings are not the exception, but the rule. Other research corroborates the shoddy state that leadership is in. Only 37% of the population believes CEOs are credible and only half of full-time workers place a great deal of trust in their employers.

The future of leadership also looks bleak. 55% of organizations are struggling with a talent shortage. Only 18% of HR professionals rate their leadership bench strength as strong or very strong. 71% said their leaders are not ready to lead their organizations into the future.

Bad leadership has a ripple effect on the performance of the people and organizations they lead. 82% of employees worldwide are not engaged, which impacts the bottom line. Companies with high level of engagement are 21% more profitable than companies with low engagement.

You share three core components of being a leader: connection, communication, and collaboration. Would you briefly touch on these?

1. Connection

At its core, leadership isn't about control, power, or a job title. Leadership is a relationship between two people. The quality of their relationship is built on the quality of their connection. No matter what technical skills you have or what industry you work in, ultimately, you're in the people business. Connection provides the spark that gets others to willingly follow your lead.

Connection is the main ingredient in trust. There's a reason we say, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care": it's the root of humanity. While this seems so simple, it's not so easy. Connection comes with a price—the investment of your time and attention. It also takes a willingness to put your ego aside.

Being connected to others also means being courageous enough to be vulnerable from time to time. If you're willing to make these investments, you'll be rewarded on the back end in dividends of engagement, commitment, and loyalty.

2. Communication

When leaders are asked, “What is your biggest challenge at work?” communication is usually at the top of the list. This makes sense: leaders spend 70-90% of their time in group or team interactions every day. Communication and leadership are joined at the hip.

Effective communication is harder than it looks. For the most part, it’s taken for granted. We treat communication like a basic utility. Just like the electricity in your home, it’s expected that it’ll always be there for you. Not until the blackout do you notice you have a real problem.

The challenge with communication isn’t one of quantity — it’s a quality issue.

Great leaders know that the nature of transferring meaning from one person to another is rife with challenges. There are natural chasms between what is said, what is meant, and what is heard. Effective leaders need to anticipate obstacles in advance, so they can proactively deal with them.

In this information age, people are drowning in data. People don’t need more information. They crave insight. The key to effective communication is to create shared understanding. Shared understanding is critical because it’s the foundation for all future action.

3. Collaboration

If there’s one constant in 2020, it’s change. This year we’ve taken VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) to a whole new level. People, companies, and entire industries have had to pivot and reinvent themselves. Technology has connected more people in more places at more times than ever before. Leaders need to harness the power of these connections.

Today’s leader can’t stay stuck in a silo, relying on the antiquated model of top-down command and control. Completely distributed teams working from home mean that you couldn’t micromanage even if you wanted to.

Today, leaders need to become skilled facilitators. Instead of being in charge, they need to focus on helping the people in their charge. Collaborative leaders call on a variety of skills. They need to know how to build a common vision and unifying purpose. They need to inspire others to bring their whole selves to work. They need to create a climate that draws out the best ideas. They need to know how to flex their decision-making style for each situation. If that wasn’t enough, they do all these things while making it easier for their people to do their best work.

These efforts bring rich rewards. Leading effective collaboration is a win/win. Not only are employees happier, creative, and energized, but companies that promote collaboration are five times as likely to be high performing.

In terms of connection, the basis is empathy. Is it possible to develop empathy? What is empathy?

What is empathy? There are two parts to empathy. The first is **cognitive empathy**. This is the ability to see things from someone else's perspective. The second aspect of empathy is called **affective empathy**. It's the ability to notice someone else's emotional state and respond appropriately.

The good news is that affective empathy is something that we're born with. As humans, we're hardwired to emotionally attune with those around us. It's why you have an instinct to rush in when you hear your baby crying.

The not so good news is that cognitive empathy needs to be developed. Babies think they are the center of the universe. (Some adults think that, too.) If we don't move past an egocentric view of the world, not only will we not be able to see things from another person's perspective, we also won't care about them.

While we're innately hardwired to empathize with others, we don't express it with *all* others. Some people are in our empathy circle, others are excluded. What makes the difference? Whether we already feel connected with them. Family members and friends make the cut. Strangers don't.

Empathy is a core component of emotional intelligence. Like a muscle, it can be strengthened, or, if unused, it will atrophy. There are some simple-to-learn, easy-to-apply practices that you can do to strengthen your empathy muscles. They include:

1. Listening with purpose
2. Practice being open
3. Cultivate Curiosity

Listen with Purpose

It's one thing to let others talk. It's quite another to listen with purpose. If you find that listening seems like the most boring thing in the world, you haven't given listening a fair shot. Listening with purpose means you come to the conversation with an active intent: How can I walk away from this having seen the world the way the other person sees it?

For example, Kyle is an EVP of large bank. When I first met him, I was struck by how well he listened. One of the first things he said was "I'm a banker by training. You're the expert on teamwork and leadership. I want to learn everything I can from you. What have you learned from talking with our team? What should we do?"

Kyle was intently focused in his listening. There was nothing passive about it. That kind of dynamic listening takes intense focus and purpose. Dynamic listening can be exhausting. And frankly, sometimes, it can be boring. You'll want to jump to your ready-made conclusions. But don't do it. The feeling of being listened to—really listened to—is a fast track to empathy and connection.

The biggest thing that gets in the way of listening with purpose is quite simple: it's offering up your complete and undivided attention. Many leaders feel they don't have time for it. If you think you don't have time for it, ask yourself: What *is not* paying attention costing you? The answer might be the wake-up call you're looking for.

Practice Being Open

Appreciating that others see and feel things differently is a pre-requisite for openness. But it's just a start. Openness means being receptive to new ideas, feelings and experiences. It means not rushing past the data or the experience into your own beliefs, assumptions and conclusions.

Letitia, a senior leader at a global insurance company that I worked with, was adamant that her leadership team cultivate the trait of being open. As a matter of practice, whenever the team gathered for offsite meetings, she'd book a reservation at an ethnic restaurant from a part of the world that none of them had been to. It was her way to get them to expand both their palate and their thinking. She wanted to shift their mindset from "That's weird" to "That's different."

If you want to grow your openness with others, start by being open with yourself. Do an honest reckoning: are you a leader who tends to control? Do you want to keep driving your agenda forward? Or are you a pleaser, who abdicates your own opinions around others?

Take an inventory: How open are you with your own feelings? With your own thoughts? How much do you admit to your own shortcomings? How much would you be willing to share these discoveries with others? It's hard to be open and empathic with others if you won't be open and empathic with yourself.

Cultivate Curiosity

If you're going to be an empathic leader, you need to be curious. Curiosity, by its nature, means being engaged. You can't be curious and stay in your comfort zone at the same time. A key to developing curiosity is inquiry. Be like a small child. Small children don't have a lot of previous experience to judge and what they're learning in a pre-assigned box. They continually ask why? And then they ask why again...and again...and again! They keep probing to gain more perspective.

As adults, we don't need to spend time digging in deeper to what we already know—we need to learn something new. It's in the new that insights, ideas, and innovation comes from.

If the benefits of curiosity are so great, why aren't more people more curious more of the time? What's the downside?

If you're going to be curious, there are a couple of big costs to pay. The first one is time. It takes time to engage with others. If you feel as though you've already got too much on your plate, you won't have much physical or mental space to focus on taking in anything new.

The second cost is ego. If you're operating as a know-it-all, you have an underlying belief that that any new stuff really isn't of much value.

Empathy is a uniquely human skill. In fact, it's the most human skill. That's why it's the basis for connection and the foundation of great leadership. It will never be outsourced to a robot or an algorithm.

These three practices—listening with purpose, being open, and cultivating curiosity, are more than just tools to strengthen your empathy. They'll attract others to you. With this increased influence, you'll reap the benefits of increased commitment and loyalty. You'll also get more done with less effort. You'll be a stronger leader.

In our digitally wired and connected world, we're all suffering from information saturation. Consider that every second there are:

- 8,030 tweets
- 66,855 Google Searches
- 73,741 YouTube Videos viewed
- 2, 689,607 emails sent

People have plenty messages competing for their precious brain cells. They're not going to focus on you just because you want them to. People don't want more information—they want insight.

Too many mediocre leaders think of other people as empty vessels to be filled. They think if a five slide PowerPoint deck is good, 25 slides must be five times as good. No. More is not better. Studies show that people only retain about 10% of any content that's they hear. Good leaders face the facts: forgetting happens. With each passing hour and day, your message will fade into the sunset.

The solution is not to try to cram more in. Instead, great communicators use the idea of "Teach Less, Learn More." To get others to retain more of your message, your message needs to be simpler and clearer.

What are a few keys to communicating with power?

When leaders communicate powerfully, it can seem like magic. But behind the curtain, there are tricks of the trade. You can break the magic of communication down into its component parts. Here are a few keys to strengthen your communication impact:

- Communicate with the End in Mind
- Have a Central Message
- Make the Implicit Explicit

Communicate with the End in Mind

When you communicate, what's your goal? Or do you even have one? Too many mediocre leaders are content focused. They string together a bunch of information, transmit it, tick their boxes, and go home.

Powerful communication isn't a transmission of information—it's a transformation. It transforms data into insight.

Your communication needs to start from the desired outcome and work backwards. As a leader, you work in the influence business. Every interaction is an opportunity to create value. Every act of communication should be an act towards persuading, educating, informing, inspiring, or motivating someone else to move in a desired direction.

Your communication needs to be framed to focus on meeting the needs of those that you're speaking with and to offer them something of value. As you prepare, step into the shoes of your audience. Consider their challenges, their needs, and how you are positioned to help them meet those needs and overcome those challenges.

Have a Central Message

Have you ever attended a meeting, and after five minutes, wondered to yourself what am I doing here? What's this supposed to be about? And find yourself quickly tuning out?

Confusion is rampant in organizations. Here's a shocking statistic: *two-thirds of senior managers can't name their firm's top priorities!*

Confusion can only be dispelled with clarity. When communicating, you need to have a clear and concise central message. It's your core theme, the point you want people to walk away with. It should be short and simple: expressed in 5-8 words: that ties together everything you say.

Your central message needs to be simple, concise, understandable and can be remembered. After all, if you're not crystal clear, how do you expect anyone else to be?

Make the Implicit Explicit

People are good at many things. Mind reading is not one of them. If you rely on implicit hints, in the hopes that your meaning will be understood, there's a good chance your hopes will be dashed. Create an environment where people can say what they mean, and mean what they say, and you'll go a long way to improving the quality of communication.

The key to making the implicit explicit is a focus on clarity and transparency. Some items to consider include:

- Personal background and preferred style of working.
- Expectations you have of team members.
- Expectations team members have of you as leader.
- Expectations team members have of each other.

Being overly explicit means there will be no surprises. People can relax and focus. In so doing, you create a huge amount of trust.

Customer Experience and How it Relates to Leadership.

Customers don't just pay for product or a service. In their journey, the customer experience is created by every touch point where your company interacts with them. This isn't limited to their exchange with a customer service representative. It's much broader, including aspects such as your online presence, how easy your website is to navigate, how quickly you respond, the quality of your product or service, and your relationship post-sale. Each one of those touchpoints is a moment of truth where customers give you a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

Understanding the customer experience is critical for leaders. Moments of truth aren't just for customers. They happen for employees as well.

If the customer experience is the basis for how customers think and feel about a brand, the employee experience is the basis for how your employees think and feel about you.

Today's employees have incredible choices. If an employee can jump ship and head down the street to work for another company for 15% higher base pay and similar benefits, the employee experience becomes a tremendous differentiator of value. The more positive the employee experience, the more likely your employee is going to be dedicated to your organization. Employees that are engaged put in 57% more effort on the job and are 87% less likely to resign than employees who are disengaged.

The key to creating a great employee experience is to leverage the power of peak moments. Peak moments are those touch points where employee expectations are particularly high. If you get this right, you'll build loyalty and commitment. Get them wrong and engagement wanes.

How do the best leaders encourage collaboration?

The best leaders know collaboration can't be mandated. Doing so would be a regression to the command and control style of old-school leadership. High-level collaboration only comes when people are inspired, focused, and eager to work with others. A secret that great

leaders know is that they can't directly motivate anyone else. What they can do is to design an environment where motivation is most likely to happen. If traditional architects design structures, motivational architects design cultures. Motivational architects work by addressing four fundamental human needs: Safety, Energy, Purpose, and Ownership. If these needs are met, people can thrive in that culture. If not, they'll flounder.

What advice do you have for the brand-new leader who is full of drive and wants to get off to a great start?

It's easy to look at leaders you admire, those you deem "successful," and put them up on a pedestal. Know that their journey to "success" was not a straight line. It was rocky road filled with mistakes and bumps along the way. That's what progress looks and feels like when it's not airbrushed and Photoshopped.

It's been said that, "Experience is the best teacher." That's partially true. Experience is the best teacher if it's reflected upon and learned from. That's why some people have twenty years of experience, and other people have one year of experience twenty times. Use each experience as a learning opportunity. If you can extract the lesson that each experience offers, you'll correct your course more quickly on the road of progress. The only way to get that experience is to do something and get started.

If you want to be something different, you have to do something different. Try something. Notice what happens. If it works, then keep doing it. If it doesn't, notice it, and change your approach.

The key is to try something. Anything. The magic comes from your effort. When in doubt, remember to return to the most human of leadership fundamentals: connection, communication, and collaboration. If there's one overarching theme to help you become a great leader it's this:

To succeed as a leader, focus on others, not on yourself.