

O Leader, Who Art Thou?

What great leaders do — you can too!

By Richard Graves and Sam Morton

George Clooney's character in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was driven by his vision of returning home to his wife and children. Modeled on the classic figure of Ulysses, he skillfully inspires and guides his companions through many trials until they reach their goal. Leadership sure looks easy on the big screen, doesn't it?

Will One Six Pack of "Thin Quick" Make You Skinny?

If you believe it will, then you probably expect to read this article and learn everything you need to be a good leader. Say, will you sell us half interest in your business for a mess of catfish?

You know, as well as we, that people just don't wake up one morning, decide they want to be Captain Marvel, and *Shazam* ... transform themselves. Leadership incubates over time through training, observing, mentoring, and, yes, having some innate abilities. The time was when people believed that leadership was the product of nature — leaders were born, not made. Today, management scientists agree that nature, nurture, and environment all combine to produce effective leaders. With wise selection and effective training, organizations can groom promising leaders, even those who may not demonstrate natural leader talents.

Many aspiring leaders adopt behaviors they observe other leaders using, whether or not the behaviors are right for the situation. No matter how you rate your leadership qualities, you should continuously renew and improve your skills. Without renewal you tend to get stale, practicing a leadership style more habitual than situational. Renewal suggests examining your actions in light of your work climate and choosing the best leadership behavior for the situation.

Most of us know that effective leadership underlies business success, along with a clear vision, a good business plan, and the guts to push through adversity without letting the competition see you sweat. When you strive to accomplish your business goals, particularly goals that involve many people working in an environment of uncertainty, it is leadership that provides clarity and direction – or not.

In today's business environment, intense, constantly shifting changes confront organizations. Unrelenting change has become the norm, pressuring and complicating most aspects of business, and creating challenges bigger than before. As a result, organizations must develop exceptional leaders who can skillfully navigate the complex, ever changing business environment.

Organizations Must Balance Two Crucial Systems

Organizations are people using tools, processes, and knowledge to produce the goods and services valued by customers. How well these social and technical systems mesh determine the effectiveness of any organization.

Many organizations are out of balance because they emphasize the technical over the social system, particularly organizations that produce products. The truth is you can trace many business failures to a breakdown in social skills – skills that include, managing change, coaching employees, resolving conflicts, and communicating goals and strategy, to name a few.

Relying solely on technical know-how as a means to solve the problems of change is not enough. Remember all the dot.coms that overnight became dot.duds. Leadership and change are social tasks and require skilled social intervention, skills not highly valued in *Technoworld*.

Organizations achieve peak performance only when they meet the needs of both the social and the technical systems. If organizations achieve any measure of effectiveness, they must release the human potential as well as the technical. Effective leadership sparks that potential.

Leadership development, though, is not a haphazard series of events, or the result of emulating people like Atilla the Hun. Developing leaders starts with identifying the building blocks of leadership, followed by training, mentoring, and practice. This article focuses on the building blocks.

The Building Blocks: 3 Core Functions of Leadership

Outstanding leaders renew and develop their skills, they develop and grow their people, and they chart direction for the organization. You can identify these three functions in the actions of past leaders such as Robert E. Lee and Martin Luther King, and in present day exemplars like Rudy Giuliani. Ironically, you also can identify the same functions in monsters like Adolf Hitler and Osama Bin Laden.

No doubt, if you are an effective leader, you, too, practice the three core functions — whether or not you consciously set out to do so.

1. Renewing and Developing Your Skills

Your strengths, weaknesses, and predispositions reflect positively or negatively on your ability to lead. By working on personal learning and development, you improve your mastery and proficiency. Exceptional leaders continually stretch to create, discover, and draw from the multiple resources around them.

Your development starts with recognizing your strengths and weaknesses, and then through education and action planning, you further develop and improve your skills.

2. Developing and Growing Your People

Outstanding leaders know how and when to direct, coach, facilitate, and delegate depending on the situation. People feel motivated because you choose a management style appropriate to that person and that situation. You empower people; you encourage and support productive people and teams, and you lead people through change.

We know of a woman, a divorced mother of three, abandoned and left destitute by her husband. With no visible means of support she desperately searched in her attic for something to sell. She found an old home beaten biscuit machine, cleaned it, and started to make and offer for sale this peculiarly southern delicacy.

She grew her company into a highly successful enterprise with a wide distribution network. And she was able to further the success of her company through her son's leadership when he took over the company many years later. She had the vision and the guts to implement her vision. Her ethics were exemplary, her caring genuine for her employees. The excellent quality of her products never varied and her commitment to success never wavered. This kind of leadership makes a difference, and yet people continue to look for shortcuts.

3. *Charting Direction for Your Organization*

Great leaders set or clarify vision and mission, keeping their organization on course during turbulent times. As a skilled change manager and systems thinker, you understand that transforming organizational culture requires a methodical, patient approach; you know how to develop and implement the strategies to effect long-term, positive change. You also understand how vision, change, and culture interrelate. And you can skillfully communicate, negotiate, and inspire. You don't need great oratorical skills. George Patton used his high, squeaky voice to inspire thousands.

You begin your journey with a vision; you see an ideal end state. But an inspiring vision stagnates and atrophies without skillful, careful support and management. Effective leadership not only provides direction, but also a strategy to nourish the vision.

Successful change requires the cooperation and compliance of many people. To garner compliance, you frame the vision in such a way that members of the culture accept and act on it. You also forge relationships and alliances, foster collaboration, and build teams necessary to accomplish the strategy.

Eight Competencies That Every Leader Should Develop

Most employees have good intentions, but many come to work with agendas different than yours. How can you shape their performance so that it aids rather than hinders accomplishing your vision and mission?

As the leader, you stand in the best position to introduce opportunities that will both increase the potential of your employees and assist them in pursuing a course of self-development. Of course, the most lasting lessons come when people's desire to learn coincides with the goals and objectives of the enterprise.

While the three core functions provide strategic direction for leadership development, competencies provide you with the tactical knowledge and skills to grow your people and lead your organization.

Competencies are underlying characteristics of a person that combine to produce superior performance. Competencies generally include motivating factors; skills, both mental and behavioral; and a relevant body of content knowledge.

Organizations identify many competencies that define effective leader behavior. Often they list twenty to thirty competencies, or more, that cover a wide range of social and technical skills. While more may be better in some circumstances, we have found that effective leader behavior stems from eight key competencies. The eight competencies are as relevant to leading and managing a company as they are to leading and managing a technical team.

- 1. Communicate vision and strategy:** the ability to take charge and inspire people with a compelling vision – giving vision, meaning, and direction to the organization.
- 2. Employ a range of persuasive skills:** the ability to use a range of persuasive techniques – understanding people and why they behave as they do.
- 3. Introduce and manage change:** the proficiency to introduce and manage change and to lead people in a new direction.
- 4. Resolve and manage conflict:** the ability to handle disagreements, reduce emotional stress, and resolve problems – this includes the ability to negotiate.

5. **Build relationships and alliances:** the proficiency to cultivate and maintain a web of business alliances and relationships, including customer relationships.
6. **Foster collaboration and build teams:** the competence to promote cooperation, inspire people, and build teams.
7. **Coach for performance:** the skills to analyze and map individual performance, clarify performance goals, gain commitment, and develop performance action plans.
8. **Renew and develop self:** the awareness of your strengths and limitations, and the insight and drive to continuously improve your skills and abilities.

Well, maybe you think we should have included more competencies, or even different ones, but because we did not by no means signals we feel they are unimportant. We reduced many competencies to an essential few. The eight competencies, if mastered, provide discretionary performance. Notice that the eight focus entirely on developing a leader's social capital.

So What?

To be sure, the business environment is becoming increasingly complex and competitive. If your organization successfully navigates the complexities and pressures of an uncertain future, it must build the structures and processes adaptive to that environment. Your organization will continue to receive pressure from a broad range of economic and social demands that require your focused attention. You will spend more time communicating, motivating, and coaching – actions aimed at transforming people's view of the new reality.

People can learn to be effective leaders because leadership comprises a set of skills. You can enhance any skill if you possess the motivation, practice the skill, receive effective feedback and coaching, and have role models that you can look up to.

Recognize that leadership is not an over the counter nostrum that miraculously changes you into an exceptional leader overnight. The price of your development is measured in desire, courage, and lasting commitment. If the price seems high, it may account for the rarity of the commodity. The initiation requires your commitment to the three core functions of leadership: developing and renewing self; developing and growing people; and charting direction for the organization.

Once you embrace the three key elements, pursue the eight competencies to fortify and complement the basic functions.

- Communicating vision and strategy
- Introducing and managing change
- Building relationships and alliances
- Managing conflict (including negotiation)
- Fostering collaboration and building teams
- Wielding a range of persuasive tactics
- Coaching for performance
- Improving and renewing skills

Even though other competencies are important, we believe mastering the eight gets a leader's work done. All focus on the development and growth of social capital. If you can do these well, many of the problems of performance, change, productivity, and morale, to name a few, will diminish.

In today's business environment you can play it safe and miss opportunities. Or you can use your leadership talents to build focused, committed teams – teams that win.

Richard Graves and Sam Morton are management consultants and trainers specializing in corporate leadership development and change management. Contact them at Xpertec@aol.com (Richard) and sammorton41@yahoo.com (Sam).