

The essence of leadership improvement

Leaders are expected to be confident. In the boardroom, expressing fear is not at all common practice. In the world of business, being afraid is considered 'not good', irrational. Being afraid means being helpless.

The hypothesis of this article is that to be a great leader, you should be afraid and explore your fears. Fear is a universal human experience. If you do not have any fears, you are either unaware of your fears, or you are lying, or you are a psychopath.

What it means to be a leader

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of definitions of leadership available. Going through these, in search of commonalities, I distilled three essential elements:

Purpose

Leaders lead towards something. Something that really matters. A meaningful purpose. A reason why. North Star. Compelling direction.

Influence

Influencing others is a key activity in the working day of a leader. Interacting with others, engaging, motivating, inspiring people. Leaders need to influence to move in the right direction, to do the right thing. Influence is no one-way street. Leaders are influenced by others continually (I should hope so).

Accountability

Leaders are accountable for results. Although I truly dislike complicated and bureaucratic RASCI charts, being accountable is an important element of leadership. Leaders give assignments, projects, tasks to other people. Although the other people are responsible, the leader is accountable. The bigger your leadership role, the less responsible you are. The CEO of a big company is responsible for nothing, and accountable for everything.

How leadership has changed

Leadership has changed quite dramatically during the last 30-40 years. The historic concept of a leader is the chess master. The smart hero, overlooking the total playing field, thinking ahead, knowing what will happen, and moving the pieces. This works well, when the world is not too complex. With 16 pieces, of which 8 move in exactly the same way, it works.

Today, the world is much too complex to lead like a chess master. There are too many pieces in the playing field, things are changing too fast, there is too much unpredictability to lead like a chess master. The metaphor of leadership today is more like the gardener. Does a gardener grow vegetables or flowers? No, the gardener grows nothing. Plants grow, they are very good at that. What the gardener does is creating an eco system that contains the right conditions for growth. The garden plan. Crop rotation. Making sure the ground is fertile, cutting weeds, providing the right amount of water and sunlight, protecting plants from cold, heat. It is a lot of work, and you may think you have done everything well, but the result is often unpredictable. If you don't accept the hard work and the unpredictability of results, you will get frustrated and give it up.

If you think this way of looking at leadership is a bit too soft for you: the gardener metaphor comes from Stanley McChrystal¹, a four-star general of the US Army, a military leader with an outstanding leadership track record. It is all about the plants growing and what the leader can do to make this possible.

What mastering leadership is about

Leadership is a contact sport. And to be a good leader, you need to practice to improve. And if you want to be a great leader, you need to practice a lot, work conscientiously to continue improving yourself. The good news is that every working day is full of opportunities to practice.

As a leader, you need to be effective in three areas²:

Leadership Process: Leaders are responsible for the allocation and effective use of resources: people, time, and money. Without effective leadership processes in place, the business is not organized for success. Three-year plans, budget process, continuous dialogue, etc.

Leadership Competencies: most of what you actually do as a leader is interacting with others, influencing others and being influenced by others. We call this the 'outer game' of leadership. The more effective you are in this outer game, the more successful you are as a leader.

Leadership Consciousness: your interior operating system, your inner game. If you practice sports like tennis, golf, or skiing, you know what I am talking about. Your inner state is decisive when there is pressure, when the stakes are high. Fears, doubts, assumptions can get in the way and interfere.

In high-pressure leadership roles, we often assume that the outer game is the only game that matters. However, what is happening beneath the surface is mediating and organizing the effectiveness of the outer game. I believe that in order to be a really effective and happy leader, you need to work on your inner game.

What the inner game of leadership is about

The inner game is your interior operating system. What drives you, how do you define yourself, what is truly important to you, what you believe in. These elements have a direct impact on your thoughts, your doubts and fears, your assumptions in any situation. And these thoughts, feelings and assumptions directly impact your behaviour, your outer game of leadership.

I mentioned earlier that purpose is a key element of great leadership. A reason why, a destiny, a meaningful goal, something vital, realizing something that really matters. We have it in ourselves to have meaningful aspirations, a vision. Purpose creates an 'inside-out' dynamic. I do this because I believe in it, because this is vital to me. A meaningful purpose, however, is inherently risky. There is no safe way to be great.

In a large organization, leaders are constantly in an environment where they have a need for safety. When there is pressure, part of us tells us to do what is safe. We need approval, endorsement, support. And we need to pay the mortgage or rent. And maybe we want to move up. These needs and concerns are only natural. When there is pressure, a part of us seeks to be safe and be worthwhile in the eyes of others.

¹ Stanley McChrystal: Team of Teams, Penguin Business, 2019

² Bob Anderson and Bill Adams: Mastering Leadership Transcends Skill alone, Leadership Circle blog, 2015

What anxiety is

This is a core tension when in any serious leadership role, with complex challenges and often high pressure. These pressures create anxiety. Anxiety is worth exploring.

What is it?

- a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome
- a strong desire or concern to do something or for something to happen

So, anxiety is a form of fear that relates to a need. The difference between fear and anxiety is that with fear, the object of fear is real, present in the here and now. Someone attacking you, a car almost running you over. Fear helps you to respond adequately. When the danger is gone, the fear fades away. With anxiety, the object of fear is something subjective, in the future. If I make mistakes in my judgment and recommendations, I will be seen as incompetent. Or: When I announce the organizational changes, people will be very unhappy, and they will feel betrayed by me.

Since the source of anxiety is in subjective and in the future, it does not fade away. It is like a mild form of fear. And with anxiety, just as with fear, what is very uncomfortable is the notion of helplessness. If this happens.....

When our inner game is anxiety-based, it steers us towards behaviour and actions that reduce the anxiety and make us feel safe and worthwhile. And here, we run into an inner conflict.

If you are in a leadership role, anxiety is inevitable. It comes with the job. Leaders need to take decisions about business, organization and people. Decisions with impact and uncertainty. Different decisions are possible. If you have no anxiety in these circumstances, you are probably a psychopath. More likely, you may not be aware of the underlying anxiety.

How defence mechanisms against anxiety work

To feel safe and worthwhile, we rely on our key strengths, of course we do. And we overextend these strengths. And we tend to justify our strength-based behaviour, while leaving other possible ways to behave in the dark. And the more we do this, the more we do self-justification. This way, we escape being anxious. In the global world of business, being anxious for something subjective is considered irrational, and 'not good'. So, it is better to not be anxious. Therefore, it is understandable that we develop defence mechanisms against anxiety³.

We may **rationalize** the anxiety away, transforming it into sound reasoning, into a 'legitimate concern'. I need to control the analysis work of my people in detail, or do it myself, because the cost of mistakes is too high for the company.

Or we may **avoid** the anxiety: 'who am I to confront this team member with his inappropriate behaviour? I am a humble person, and it is better not to judge people too much.'

Or we may **deny** the anxiety. The Achilles heel of van Moof, a Dutch manufacturer of fancy e-bikes, was the combination of have their own spare parts, their own exclusive repair service and at the same time a quality problem, causing huge repair workload. The leadership of the company neglected these risks, did not work on solving the problem, but instead opened flagship stores in New York and Tokyo.

³ Karen Horney: The Neurotic Personality of our Time, W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., Publishers, New York, 1937

And of course we can also **deafen** the anxiety. Working excessive hours, extreme exercise, alcohol, sex.

When these defence mechanisms are active, we do not explore our anxiety and the source of it. The anxiety remains more or less unconscious, and we act in a way that makes us feel safe and worthwhile. So, we do act in a way that reduces our anxiety, at least for a while, but we may not really address the challenge in the most effective way.

How to lift your inner game by exploring your anxiety

First, get feedback from others on your key strengths and how you may overuse and overextend these key strengths. It is remarkable how sharp others see us as we really are. Especially when you synthesize the observations of numerous people.

Secondly, make friends with your anxieties instead of rationalizing them away, or denying, avoiding or deafening them. People without fears are psychopaths. Explore your anxieties, allow them to be there, face your fears and contemplate how you can consciously do the right thing. Introspect how your reactive tendencies work. What triggers them, how do react, and what could be an alternative, more effective way instead of repeating this reactive behaviour and justifying it.

Thirdly, contemplate on your aspirations, your purpose. How do I contribute to the well-being of myself and at the same time the well-being of others? Think about how you can live these aspirations in the way you lead. This afternoon, you will do some work on purpose. Don't take this lightly, don't be cynical about it, and don't think this is a one-off exercise. Remember, purpose is inherently risky, there is no safe way to be great.

If you want to follow this advice, you need to create space and time for introspection in your life. This is not easy! Not enough hours in the day, not enough days in the week. And in the era of internet, smart phone and social media, we are very busy with extrospection. Looking outside, to others, and showing our superficial, inflated image of ourselves to others. Don't show off with your purpose in life on LinkedIn, think about it and live it.

So, back to the starting point.

Purpose

In order to provide purpose for others, you need to have your own meaningful purpose. Not the hyped, look how special I am, hysterical, social media-oriented purpose, but an inside-out one. Live it.

Accountability

Being accountable is an essential element of leadership. But guess what, no one holds you accountable for the quality of your inner game. It is invisible for others, and you will not be evaluated on it by others. But trust me, of all the leaders I worked with, the ones who were really good in growing their leadership, who became really effective and happy, were the ones who exercised introspection in a disciplined way. Daily rather than weekly.

Influence

If you do this, your influence on other people will change. Great leaders do not create followers, they create other leaders. They encourage development, freedom and creativity in others.

Willem van der Lee, December 2024

www.willemvanderlee.com