

The Unnatural Leader

A more complex business world requires less rigid leadership and the ability to respond to an ever-changing environment.

ONCE UPON A TIME, heroic leaders steered an organization with a firm grip and solved problems single-handedly while still managing to keep the troops inspired. For better or worse, that stereotype doesn't fly anymore in American business, and it's even more nuanced in the global realm. The current characteristics and traits of effective leadership present a new model that turns the classic version on its head.

One advantage of having coached and worked with senior leaders and CEOs for more than 20 years is the sense we've developed for the big picture. Particularly in the past 10 years, the world has become both increasingly complex and increasingly transparent. To be credible in the business world of 2005, leaders need to respond effectively to that complexity, while also being more transparent about the reasons for their decisions and communicating with an extremely diverse workforce.

If that approach to leadership sounds like it might strain a few underused muscles, it should. What's felt like natural leadership for a long time is no longer functional. To be effective, leaders must now behave in ways that feel unnatural. The characteristics and approaches they need to develop seem antithetical to the traditional process of leadership. Our research and firsthand observations led us to define a number of "unnatural" leadership instincts demonstrated by the most effective leaders. Four of those new instincts are personal challenges; three have to do with leading teams; and three are about leading the organization. You'll find, however, no formula for adopting these 10 unnatural instincts. Each must be considered and adapted on a situational basis. For a global leader, that means that cultural considerations create an additional dimension.

Personal challenges

In the personal realm, leaders must challenge themselves.

Refuse to be a prisoner of experience. Leaders, perhaps even more than most people, are prone to keep doing what has made them successful in the past. Why change what has become second nature? The temptation to go with what has always worked is especially strong today, given the degree to which decision-making time has compressed and the rapidity with which new challenges bang on the door.

Unfortunately, experience can be a handicap, if not a prison. The inclination to reach for tried-and-true approaches means that you're effectively blind to the opportunities and hazards of constant change. The unnatural leader recognizes the need to be comfortable with chaos in order to navigate a business environment that's difficult to predict, let alone direct. That requires honing a discipline for looking at new situations with a fresh eye.

Expose your vulnerabilities. At some level, leaders instinctively believe that credibility is enhanced by presenting certainty and decisiveness, remaining calm in

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the eye of the storm, and never getting caught making a mistake. An up-and-coming manager can't help but notice that an air of infallibility seems to propel a person onto the leadership fast track, no matter what the party line may be. And yet, there's real evidence that senior executives make their biggest errors precisely because they maintain that aura of invulnerability.

There's too much ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty in the world for any leader to expect to have all the answers. Projecting absolute certainty and unshakeable confidence creates a barrier that hinders a person from receiving alternative perspectives, contrary data, and critical information. Leaders need a strong point of view, but they must also develop an unnatural instinct for admitting that they don't always know the right way to go. Gaps in knowledge and a deliberate suspension of judgment actually provide space for team members and direct reports to step forward and contribute at a higher level. A leader who enlists that support actively and schedules time for learning and information gathering is better prepared to deal with change.

Acknowledge your shadow side. Our strengths cast a shadow. Too much charisma contributes to a sense of arrogance and invulnerability. A burning desire for perfection can create intolerance for the mistakes of others. Years ago, the shadow side was better hidden by the respect afforded to those in leadership positions. In an age of transparency and teamwork, the shadow can get leaders into a lot of trouble quickly.

The talented people that surround a leader do not—and perhaps cannot—put up with a leader's shadow for long. Abusive behavior or inability to accept input, for example, are major impediments to team functionality. Peers and direct reports can easily undermine a leader's efforts if they feel that the leader's weaknesses are eclipsing his or her strengths. On the other hand, if a leader is open to acknowledging his or her shadow side and works hard to negate its effects, peers and reports feel safe and encouraged to pitch in and be supportive. It may not feel natural for a leader to be so open, but it works.

Develop a right-versus-right decision-making mentality. Natural leaders want the right answer, and many are willing to dig hard to get it. They will do the research, push reports and associates for data, and gather evidence from critical sources. But, then they want to make a clear-cut decision and move forward with resolve. It's a characteristic of the pragmatic, level-headed executive.

The complex web of multiple interests, perspectives, and possibilities makes clear-cut decisions next to impossible. No amount of analysis or re-

search will yield one right answer because there are always a number of possible right answers available. Executives are often faced with a choice between right and right.

It's unnatural for a leader to accept that there's no one right solution, but doing so frees the leader to consider a range of solutions. At such times, values may become the touchstone over facts. Alternatively, a leader may try one path but be willing and able to shift directions in the future. This new pragmatism prevents a leader from being handcuffed by past decisions that are no longer effective.

Team challenges

Going beyond the self, today's leaders must also exhibit unnatural characteristics to lead teams effectively.

Create teams that create discomfort. The old boys club is not a group, it's a state of mind. Leaders are inclined to surround themselves with trusted colleagues and friends, with whom they can let their guard down somewhat and share ideas, opinions, and concerns. Ironically, that sense of comfort can create an environment of sameness in which a leader is unaware of important information and ideas. Predictable thinking patterns, limited points of view, and a narrow range of experience insulate a leader from critical data and innovative approaches.

Unnatural leaders build teams in which contradictory views are in creative conflict. They're willing to choose team members whose thinking they view as radical or untraditional. They even select strong-minded individuals they have disagreed with in the past. Balance and diversity are more critical than comfort and unity.

Trust others before they earn it. A natural leader's trust in team members and direct reports builds slowly, only after loyalty, performance, and commitment have been demonstrated in tough situations. An unnatural leader learns to offer trust at the outset of a relationship, as a means of accelerating the chemistry that's critical to the high performance of any team.

That unnatural mode is necessary for a number of reasons. A merger or alliance may turn competitors into colleagues overnight. Fast-moving organizations need to be able to form temporary project teams to seize new opportunities. Talented new hires have to hit the ground running as soon as they join the organization. Without trust, teams are severely hampered in their ability to share ideas, work together, and solve problems. Fortunately, trust is catalyzed by the simple act of offering it up freely and expecting it in return.

Coach and teach rather than lead and inspire. Most leaders understand the importance of coaching and teaching. Natural leaders, however, still find the

Unnatural Selection

The authors of this article were asked to put theory aside and to offer names of leaders who might fit their unnatural criteria.

"I had dinner recently with Bill Weldon (chairman and CEO, Johnson & Johnson)," says David L. Dotlich, who adds that the executive "practically described" the attributes set out in the book on which this article is based. "He talked about how he manages, acknowledges vulnerability, and doesn't worry about who gets the credit. I am biased, but I would say he definitely fits the bill.

"I also think Nelson Mandela is a good example of a public figure who is an unnatural leader. He's known for his own ability to 'connect rather than create.'"

"This will reveal my own biases," says co-author Peter Cairo, "but Andrea Jung would be a great example." He says that the Avon Products chairman and CEO has "high self-awareness and is not afraid of bringing the best talent into the organization." He adds that she has brought discipline to Avon's operations while not losing sight of the long-term vision. "She gets the role of leadership development in executing strategy," Cairo adds.

intimacy and expectations of a coaching relationship to be very unnatural. Direct reports look to leaders for much more than marching orders. They expect guidance and feedback in line with development needs.

Natural leaders fall back on a "lead and inspire" mode by default. Unnatural leaders know they must make time for reports, be available emotionally to discuss workplace issues, and be honest and supportive in providing feedback. If all of that feels outside the agenda of achieving objectives and results, the leader is missing the point.

Organizational challenges

Finally, at the enterprise level, leaders also lead "teams of teams" through unnatural characteristics. **Connect instead of create.** Boundarylessness may have been pioneered by General Electric Co. years ago, but it's still an unnatural mode for most organizations. No organization, however, can adopt, take advantage of, or respond to new technologies, new products, and market changes rapidly enough without getting very good at forming connections and alliances. Natural leaders—firmly invested in their own organization's success—find it difficult to admit that the organization needs outside help. And they find it next to impossible to allow others access to their proprietary ideas and approaches.

Unnatural leaders reject the heroic ideal of going

it alone. Instead, they're willing to exchange information, ideas, and products with allies and competitors to stay on top of new developments and opportunities. They recognize that pride of ownership is a hollow victory in an open-source world.

Give up some control. The ability to control situations and outcomes is often critical to a young leader's development. Leaders have a natural inclination to continue flexing their control muscles as they move up the organization. With greater power and authority, however, the increased ability to assert control becomes an impediment to success. Despite the constant pressure for results, leaders must learn to loosen their grip on control.

It can be difficult, and the behaviors that are used to assert control can be subtle and hard to identify. Nevertheless, the unnatural leader must strive for a more effective balance between control and autonomy to get the most from people.

Challenge conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is a critical aspect of an organization's culture. It filters events and ideas in a way that organizes new information into culturally appropriate responses. When conventional wisdom becomes too beholden to the past, however, an organization's culture grows stale. The natural leader has much at stake in keeping conventional wisdom sacred; after all, he or she helped formulate it. The unnatural leader challenges conventional wisdom because a vibrant, innovative interpretation of the world is essential.

Challenging conventional wisdom is not done alone, and it's not done with revolutionary fervor. The unnatural leader preserves the culture while opening it up to new approaches and ideas. To be effective, the unnatural leader enrolls others in a continuing questioning of basic assumptions.

Recalibrate the leadership model

It can be difficult to shake the idea that the traditional heroic leadership model feels natural because it is right. Like a familiar and well-trodden path, few who engage in natural leadership question where the approach came from or where it is leading, even in the face of failure or demonstrations of inadequacy. Our traditional view of leadership is deeply ingrained in our psyche. Leaders are calm, decisive, and demanding. They never show uncertainty or a lack of resolve. They are pragmatists who favor results over values and believe that the shortest distance between two points is always a straight line. They exhibit personal power in the form of charisma, inhabit power by position, and use power as a blunt instrument to achieve their goals. They never fail. And, by implication, they never grow.

As Charles Handy wrote in *The Hungry Spirit*, it's

time for us to “acknowledge that there are over 40 million learners who aren’t in school anymore and who need to urgently discover their strength through failings.”

Despite what one might expect, most executives buy into the idea of unnatural leadership, at least intellectually. But if there’s one constant truism of leadership, it’s that words must match deeds. When it comes to demonstrating unnatural leadership, most executives are quick to return to old habits because those behaviors feel comfortable to them and others, and are often sanctioned by the organization. For the individual, the group, and the organization, resistance to unnatural leadership is not always rational, logical, or even easy to explain, but it’s a formidable barrier.

What can be done to remove such resistance factors and accelerate the leader’s shift to a new set of unnatural capabilities? Leaders must learn to look up from the myriad of details that clutter their workday and readjust attention on the big picture. Few leaders ever give themselves the opportunity to assess their leadership assumptions regularly; it just isn’t scheduled. By acknowledging the paradox and chaos facing today’s leaders, we encourage a focused self-awareness that can break the grip of old ways.

Combining that awareness with small unnatural steps can bring more lasting changes in leadership behaviors. If we give leaders the opportunity to test their new muscles in designated experimentation zones—times and places set aside where awkwardness is sanctioned—we provide a substitute for the security of the familiar and comfortable. Peer coaching, peer review, and 360-degree feedback can further help accentuate awareness and accelerate the adoption of new behaviors, while simultaneously enlisting the support and encouragement of colleagues and stakeholders—the very people a leader probably fears being unnatural in front of most.

Little by little, the discipline of analyzing one’s own actions and assessing the consequences of both traditional and unnatural behaviors sets in. The unnatural leader learns to modulate his or her approach depending on the situation and cultural context. By exercising such muscles regularly, the unnatural leader begins to feel a lot more natural at home in the world. **TD**

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