

Leadership-the rest of the story

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ABSTRACT

My limit has been reached. I'm talking about leadership hero worship. Check out these recent article and book titles: "Managing with Heart;" "Not just Smart but Wise;" "Rewaken Your Passion for Work;" "Leadership that Gets Results;" "Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership;" "Caring Leadership;" "Understanding Your Emotional Connection;" "Servant Leadership;" "The Extraordinary Leader."

FULL TEXT

Headnote

It's not all about having heart, caring and compassion

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To be sure, extraordinary leaders are out there. But how many? How many business leaders truly have heart? Are truly compassionate? Wise? Emotionally connected to their workforce? Servants to their organizations?

I think they are few and far between. The evidence: 63 percent of workers worldwide are not actively engaged in their work, according to a 2013 Gallup survey. That's almost two out of three. Plus, 24 percent are actively disengaged. Gallup estimates these actively disengaged workers in the U.S. alone cost companies \$450 to \$550 million in lost productivity each year.

According to the report, "Only 41 percent of employees felt that they know what their company stands for and what makes its brand different from its competitors' brands." Hello leaders? Calling all leaders...

The engagement problem

Numerous reasons exist why employees are not committed to their work, and leadership for the most part seems unable to do anything about it.

- * Baby boomer commitment flags as more and more boomers near the retirement finish line.

- * Young employees have seen all the layoffs in recent times and hesitate to commit when they don't know how long they'll have a job.

- * Companies hire more and more part-timers, temps and contractors at minimum wage-how much engagement can you expect from these workers on the margins?

- * Job one for many CEOs in 2014 is squeezing every penny they can out of operations. Driving down costs is today's mantra. But it won't "reawaken the passion for work."

- *Millions of employees have gone years, since the Great Recession of 2008, with little or no pay raises. They worry more about falling behind than being engaged at work.

The cost reduction imperative

I don't see a lot of heart, empathy, caring or compassion by leaders on display here. The evidence points to few emotional connections being made by leaders. I don't see a lot of servitude, unless it's in the name of lower costs.

"Leadership that gets results" in 2014 seems oriented around driving costs out of the business, running as lean as possible, and loading up surviving employees with more work. Yep, that'll drive up productivity and make leaders look "not just smart but wise."

Leaders who successfully win over employees, take the time to talk and listen to employees, build trust and pride in work, and get bottom line results that satisfy stockholders and stock analysts are swimming against the tide in times like these. Some have natural born charisma and inherent emotional intelligence. Some have approachable, extroverted personalities and are "people people." But I doubt many leaders have become successful by reading the reams of selfhelp leadership books and articles.

So what trips up leaders?

What drains a leader's energy?

In her book, "Tough Truths" about leadership truths that no one talks about, the first ugly truth that author Deirdre Maloney dispenses is, "It's all about politics." Leaders are de facto politicians. They spend a good bit of their days and evenings influencing and persuading, networking and schmoozing, exercising diplomacy, back-slapping and gladhanding at receptions, getting rid of deadwood, revising and revamping and reorganizing - all to get what they want.

Second, Maloney says leaders are not as interesting as they think they are. That applies to most of us. For leaders it makes sense because to rise to the top, ambition and ego have to be mighty healthy.

Third, Maloney says in effect many leaders spend a good bit of time acting, role-playing. They know their employees take their cues from top leaders. Unless they are that kind of Howard Hughes recluse, leaders operate under the klieg lights. So part of their energy goes into acting for the media, for stockholders, for analysts, for employees, for competitors, for regulators and public officials.

I'd add one more element that can throw leaders off if they are not careful. Most leaders who reach high levels of authority have manipulated people and situations all along the way. And let's not get all negative about "manipulate." I'm not talking exploitation, lying or falsifying résumés or being unethical. Look it up. Manipulate = maneuvering, finagling, wangling, jockeying, cunning, crafty, wily. Manipulation can be a stratagem. A manipulator can be a strategist or tactician. I'm not talking evil. Call it realpolitick.

And when they reach the top, when they get the coveted title and power, leaders use deft manipulations to stay there.

Living in the leadership bubble

By far and away most leaders are not out and out frauds. They are intelligent, often brilliant, poised, confident and ready to work harder and longer than anyone else. But are they heroes? Certainly a few. But they are few and far between. For many, their work ethic, work load, travel, time constraints, deal making, meetings all day long, and ambition leave little time for compassionate caring (until a worker is killed on the job, unfortunately). Too many leaders live in bubbles, cocoons, disconnected from day to day realities of their workers. Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich wrote in his autobiography how he became trapped in an opaque bubble that prevented him from seeing, hearing and feeling any sense of empathy.

It's tough to break out of the leadership bubble. The bubble is built and maintained by loyalists, aides, and various enablers of leadership isolation.

These traps leaders can fall into warrant more attention. This is especially the case in industrial safety, where many safety pros are striving for leadership skills and influence. It's not all about having heart, caring and empathy. Don't ignore the realpolitick of maneuvering and targeting key players to get what you want. Don't think it's all about being a hero. Get a true bead on leadership and what it takes.

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