

LEADERSHIP FROM WITHIN



Understanding the role of thought enables leaders to attend to mood and improve team productivity.

Effective leadership is instantly recognized by those who are touched by it. When a leader acts with common sense, grace, and deep intelligence, the people being led feel calm and confident. There is faith in the chosen direction, a willingness to pitch in, and a sense that the hard work is no longer so difficult.

All of us have experienced moments like this, but they are the exceptions. Often people remark that they were lucky to have been part of something unique. There is the unspoken thought that they may never experience it again. Even the leader may be somewhat awestruck and unable to explain what happened, much less replicate it.

If competent leadership is that obvious, then why is it so elusive? Is it because we are trying to catch a butterfly, and the instant we do, the beauty and elegance of its flight disappears?

Leading is like living. The moment we try to define it or give it form as "leadership," its essential grace disappears. Perhaps this is why so much has been written about leadership with so little effect on improving its quality.

Great leaders instinctively know this. They don't attempt to explain their leadership any more than great artists put their artistry into words or great athletes dissect their superhuman feats. The act, like the art or the accomplishment, speaks for itself. But suppose, for a moment, that there is a common denominator between the artist, the leader, and the athlete. What can we point to that links them?

For one thing, they all would agree that their moments of inspired action came to them seemingly without conscious direction. They "just do it." They often talk about time slowing down, giving them a chance to see things with complete clarity. Sometimes they describe a sense of observing themselves or of being somewhat removed from their actions, almost as if they were having an out of body experience. They call this "being in the zone."

For another thing, they often mention experiencing profound feelings of joy, peace, warmth, compassion or gratitude. And these emotions seem independent of the stamina that was required, the desperation of the situation, or the physical properties of the materials they used.

Now, the fact that they did not have to "think" about their actions or feelings during the moment of action does not mean that they were not "thinking." Thought is the universal experience of life. And it is another common denominator linking the leader, the artist, and the athlete. Perhaps thought is the main thing that links their actions for, as Buddha said, "We are what we think; with our thoughts we create the world." What he is pointing to is the universal fact that our reality arises from our thinking. In other words, whatever is on our minds is what looks real to us.

People forget this basic fact of life. We all know that we think, but we sometimes lose sight of the fact that our thinking creates our reality. What is on our minds comes to life as feelings, and these feelings evoke our behaviors. If we are thinking peaceful thoughts, life looks tranquil. If we are thinking about how we look to others, life seems like a race we cannot win, for how can we measure up to the expectations of the world. If our thoughts are worried, life presents an unending stream of worrisome things.

But as humans, we have been given a wonderful gift -- the power to change our thoughts. The moment we change our thinking our reality shifts!

Edwin Moses, the world's greatest hurdler, understood this. Sometimes he became so concerned about a race that he became physically ill. But when those thoughts crept up on him, he found that he could consciously put this anxiety out of his mind by simply not paying attention to it. As he let go of this worry, his mind relaxed. And in this more peaceful state, he found the confidence and joy to perform well, since the only barriers left to contend with were the hurdles themselves. Moses won five Olympic gold medals and retired from racing without ever having lost a single competition!

Consider the leader who is faced with an under-performing business and calls a meeting of the unit's four or five top people. Typically, the leader has already analyzed the problem and come up with several solutions. He or she is now thinking about the best way to "sell" these ideas to the other managers.

The moment the meeting begins, the leader senses resistance, an air of tension in the room. The others know something important is at stake and are fearful of the outcome, perhaps even angry. The leader's conviction of already having the right answer fuels this negativity, especially if the leader becomes strident or autocratic.

Progress is difficult and slow as if the group were mired in mud. Fearful thoughts cause people to react defensively; angry thoughts spark arguments over even trivial points, and anxious thoughts lead to claims that nothing, not even the simplest changes, will ever work. The leader, being already committed to an answer, may become more and more assertive, slipping over the line from "selling" to "telling." That in itself can contribute to the rockiness of the session.

When the meeting is over, people are spent. At best, the leader gets a partial victory and that at a high cost, having traded away elements to persuade the managers to "buy into it." Everyone knows that the managers' hearts are not really behind the decision and that the journey will be difficult since resistance will spring up again and again.

Sound familiar? We've all been in too many meetings like this one!

Now, if that leader understood the role of thought in life, things might have turned out very differently. First of all he or she would have known better than to become too wedded to an answer, preferring to pose the question to the group -- something along the lines of "what do we need to do to lift the performance of his business?" and then let them wrestle with it.

Mindful of how people's thinking creates their reality, the leader might have begun the meeting by pointing out that what people are thinking determines what looks real to them, and that changing their thoughts can change their reality. This is so obvious that people instantly recognize its truth and, in many cases, begin to feel more relaxed and more open to change.

Because our thoughts come to life via our feelings, the leader would have felt the tension in the room. Sensing the managers' fear, anger, and anxiety, the leader might have felt compassion towards them and opened the meeting by expressing warmth and respect for each person. This would have had a calming effect since positive feelings are contagious.

Once the mood grew lighter, the leader could have proceeded to explore the key questions and asked the members of the group to contribute their own insights. These insights would be fresh and innovative, coming as they did from the people's inner wisdom.

This inner wisdom would have been accessible because other thoughts, fears and anxieties, would not be crowding it out. The meeting would have taken less time, and the sense of forward progress would have been tangible to everyone. At the conclusion, the managers and the leader alike would be committed to the new direction since everyone's fingerprints would be on it. If one manager was going to be adversely impacted, the group might well have addressed this directly. Despite not liking the outcome, this person could not help but be touched by the concern and support of the group.

Two meetings, same set of facts, but very different outcomes. In the second scenario, the leader didn't have to work as hard, knowing that forward progress would happen more easily as the managers worked out decisions and agreements.

In this second meeting, the leader understood the role of thought in life and acted on this understanding. Wisdom and common sense are just a "thought away" for all of us. And they are the essence of leading (as well as living) with grace and ease.

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