

THE BLADE WHEEL OF MIND TRANSFORMATION



Ego is everywhere in today's culture. Yet leadership with humility engenders more dedicated followers.

A recovering addict tells us that hard as it was for him to kick heroin, it was even tougher to give up cigarettes. Indeed, we know patients with lung cancer and emphysema who continue to smoke. Yet we submit that there is an even more powerful addiction, something that we all indulge in almost daily. That is: praise.

Don't you feel good when the boss gives you an "atta-girl?" And if he singles you out for recognition in front of a crowd, wow! What a rush! But such satisfaction is short-lived and whets our appetite for more of the same. Like Audrey, the extraterrestrial plant in Little Shop of Horrors, our ego thrums a constant demand: "Feed me; feed me!"

The world's religions warn of the perils of ego and point toward humility. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," Jesus sermonized. "Moses was a very humble man, more humble than any man on the face of the earth," the Torah observes. The Koran is filled with humility statements, such as: "The true servants of the Gracious God are those who walk on the earth humbly...." And Eastern thought teaches: "The source of human suffering is self-importance."

Dharmaraksita, a Buddhist mystic living a couple of millenniums ago, wrote 116 verses, The Blade Wheel of Mind Transformation, as a daily guide for those seeking enlightenment. His words penetrate modernity's hurried, worried tempo - just as stepping through the doors of St. Patrick's Cathedral, gazing across the Masi Mara plain, or walking through a pine forest connects us with our deepest reservoirs of humanity.

Like a blade cutting through hardwood, Dharmaraksita describes a lifetime's work of reshaping one's personality, rejecting deep-seated habits, renouncing ego. His instruction is impossible, really, to put down. No matter how sharply he expounds, he weaves in sufficient wisdom and compassion that one is compelled to keep reading and reflecting. Let us share a typical verse - it's hardly stuff that one can dismiss as being fluff:

“Though I want immediate results, my efforts are feeble;
Though I pursue many tasks, I never complete a single one.
Trample on the head of this betrayer, false conception!
Strike at the heart of this butcher and enemy, Ego!”

These ancient words speak to modern organizations. Haven't we all suffered under people who are at the mercy of ego? Leaders who want immediate results and, in desperation, concoct one "program du jour" after another. Or bosses who simply can't contain their frustration when they are thwarted from getting what they want and lash out at underlings.

Leaders, in other words, who are at the mercy of their own mental turmoil: unable to calm down, step back, reflect, connect, and be present. Acting, instead, like a monkey guiding an elephant: allowing their minds to follow every random thought, blindly trampling on others' feelings and wreaking havoc.

What, you may be wondering, does this have to do with executive development? Simply this: if you aspire to lead, you must first get the upper hand on your own ego. Then, as surely as the sun will set today and rise tomorrow, you may become the kind of leader who serves followers and engenders the feeling that, “what we accomplished we did ourselves” (to paraphrase Lao Tzu).

The secret is committing to the everyday practice that lies at the core of leading: becoming aware of one’s own human functioning. Mind Transformation, as pointed to in these verses, is not a case of rewiring one’s brain. Rather, it requires a disciplined mastering of the mind’s elusive, mysterious ways so that one acts in concert with one’s own well-being and actively helps others flourish.

Every single one of us has the capacity within to confront our ego and become a great leader in the process. Yet few of us have the persistence.

The secret of greatness in virtually any field, scientific researchers have concluded, is disciplined, consistent practice. Of course, it’s no surprise that the more one practices, the better one becomes. What’s new is the proof that raw talent matters less than diligence, reports Fortune Senior Editor Geoff Colvin (October 19, 2006). Mental and physical attributes play a role in success, in the sense they help one eliminate certain paths. But as one researcher notes, “attributes play less of a role than one would think; for example, some international chess masters have IQs in the 90s.” A violinist judged to be superior logged 10,000 hours of practice to lesser players’ 7,500 or 5,000 hours.

Enlightened leaders “play” group dynamics with virtuosity. They don’t lose their tempers; they act kindly even when they are not feeling well; they pay attention to tone and avoid pushing their agenda when people are dispirited; they are attentive, caring, gracious. They set high standards, while actively helping others attain them; they refrain from punishment. They can be counted on in the darkest moments; they are hopeful in the face of adversity and even-keeled when successful. They speak frankly, from the heart, without being mean spirited; they are respectful; they are modest.

These behaviors don’t “just happen.” Leadership, like violin-playing, requires practice. It begins when, whatever the catalyst, leaders are propelled towards the hard work of self-examination; of re-acquiring their ability to recognize insights; of investing time in reflection; of learning to listen as they did as children, with full attention and focus; of striving for a state of quiet-mindedness; of quelling emotions and evanescent sensory stimulation.

So how to begin this journey? Ah, the preliminaries!

Having the right attitude is essential. By attitude, we are pointing to an appreciation of life, for the gift of life.

Next is intention. Leadership is fired by a flash of recognition that we are seeking meaning for our life – something beyond status, money, comfort, prestige. We realize that all we have accomplished and acquired will be meaningless at the moment of our death. This sense that we are missing something embraces humility.

Third, we need to accept the law of cause and effect. The old saying, “What goes around, comes around,” points us to understand how life works. As life unfolds, our behaviors have effects. But life is neutral – it does not ascribe motives, assign guilt. Whether or not we like our results, we can view them as life’s way of offering us lessons - sometimes with a gentle tap on the shoulder, sometimes a shove, sometimes a roundhouse punch that knocks us flat on our back. The trick to success is staying open and alert, and looking within for the root cause of what happens to us so that we are never victim to circumstance, but the leader of our own life.

So how do you set upon the leader’s path? Examine the habit, the ignorance that is reflected in the consequence of your actions. And be sure that you take that look from a non-critical stance: sense that you are trying to do the best you can, given your awareness. Weave

compassion into the sharpness of your self-examination so that you may sustain the intention of learning by becoming ever more conscious of yourself.

Thus, you may learn to abide naturally in uncontrived awareness - living in the present, a natural state, un-afflicted. Then you, too, will enjoy the concentration of energy that gets the job done easily, with simplicity, grace and surprisingly good outcomes. You will attract followers by cultivating the paradoxically powerful humility of a great leader.

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