



What Makes Great Leaders GREAT?

by **Stephen Xavier**

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What distinguishes great leaders from merely competent ones is that the great ones have a unique combination of qualities. They think strategically and with vision, yet are flexible. They are politically savvy, yet have emotional intelligence, compassion and empathy. They are assertive, yet humble. They are trustworthy and trust others. They also wear many hats comfortably – they are relationship builders, mediators, advocates, strategists and executives par excellence. Their ability to comprehend and master complex situations – market trends, changing economic and political climates and the organizational complexities of people and process – gives them a global perspective that fosters unique ways of making decisions and marshaling resources. Their ability to rally people around meaningful causes generates breakthrough thinking and opens new opportunities and markets.

It is this combination of qualities that makes great leaders unique, gives them sustainability and makes them exceptional coaches and mentors. In essence, they are “servant leaders.” They focus on meeting the needs of those they lead, coaching and mentoring to bring out the best in employees.

What Does It Take?

“Leaders as mentors and coaches bring tremendous value to an organization because their experiences, when shared appropriately, offer a development opportunity to employees unparalleled by external consultants,” says David Yudis, an executive in leadership development at Disney. “At the same time, the process of coaching and mentoring benefits the leaders themselves. In developing these skills, leaders learn to bond with their people, while also being given the chance to evaluate and raise their awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses.”

Coaching and mentoring, in the purest sense, are about teaching and guiding, respectively. As coaches, great leaders teach, as mentors they guide. Both are best done by example, in the form of giving advice and providing insight grounded in broad experience. Let’s examine a few of the specific qualities of great leaders that are indispensable for successful coaching and mentoring.

Perspective. Leaders are typically one level above the members of their teams. A coach or mentor, on the other hand, should ideally be two or more

levels above the individual being coached or mentored for the broadest possible perspective. In Southern California Edison’s mentoring program, for example, a senior executive from the transmission side of the business mentors a lower-level manager on the customer service side of the business. The two individuals are not only two levels apart, but are also from opposite sides of the organization. Leaders who started at the ground level of an organization and worked their way up make particularly effective mentors because they have a broad and deep knowledge of the company and insight into its future direction. They can provide a periscope view high above the surface that is not available from someone’s immediate boss.

As a coach or mentor, a leader can also provide perspective on the impact of another executive’s actions. “The higher one rises in a large organization, the less feedback one is likely to receive from subordinates, peers and even superiors,” says Yudis. “A coach or mentor can fill this void by providing executives with an unbiased perspective on their effectiveness in a safe environment.”

Clarity. “Leaders are sometimes not aware that a message they have just communicated was never understood and therefore could not be followed,” says Mark Hoffman, Vice President, Human Resources with St. Jude Medical’s Cardiac Rhythm Management Division (CRMD) in Sylmar, California. “What is missing is a strong leadership communication position. The leader’s message is not understood because even though the leader may be walking it, he or she is not talking it. The result is disharmony and lack of alignment. At SJM we have developed two leadership programs that reverse the old phrase ‘walk the talk’ to equip our leaders with the skills they need to ‘talk the walk.’ The first, ‘Leadership for Extraordinary Performance,’ is based on the five leadership practices listed in *The Leadership Challenge* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. It helps leaders gain a better understanding of the difference between leadership and management. We believe that the organizations that excel and sustain their successes are those that have learned how to combine great leadership skills with great management process.”

To sustain momentum, CRMD has developed and launched a complementary program that reinforces

these skills through practice. In 'The Sixth Practice: Getting to the Heart of Leadership at SJM,' participants spend a day practicing the five Kouzes and Posner leadership skills in relation to specific organizational issues. The next day and a half is spent on 'The Sixth Practice,' leadership communication. "It is not about gestures and voice inflection," Hoffman explains, "but about getting to the heart of the message. Participants learn the three basic elements— symbols, facts and emotion—that must be present for a coherent, memorable message. Assisted by audio and video feedback, they coach each other in taking their communication skills to a higher level. We've received tremendous initial support and positive feedback for the program, so we know we're on to something that will really make a difference in strengthening the organization's leadership."

Visionary thinking. An example is former basketball star Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Jr., now Chairman and CEO of Johnson Development Corporation. Johnson's mission is to be the nation's foremost development company through enrichment of underserved markets. He develops entertainment complexes, coffee houses, restaurants and retail centers in underserved communities, providing jobs to residents and employing local minority contractors and vendors. According to www.johnsondevelopmentcorp.com, "Rather than follow the trend set by many retail businesses and service providers that dismiss urban communities as economic wastelands, Mr. Earvin "Magic" Johnson regards them as renewed frontiers to introduce viable business enterprises and realize solid financial success." In a coaching and mentoring role, Johnson frequently speaks to businesses and educational institutions about his success and experiences and, through the Magic Johnson Foundation, he spearheads programs that improve the health, educational and social needs of inner-city youth. As a United Nations Messenger of Peace, he imparts information to youth about drugs, violence and other social issues.

Emotional intelligence. Great leaders distinguish themselves by having above average EI. When they coach and mentor, this becomes apparent as a sense

of vulnerability about themselves. They share not only their successes, but are also cognizant of their failures. They are open and honest about themselves and know how to articulate lessons learned in order to teach and inspire others. They also recognize that, in the process of coaching and mentoring, they continue to learn and grow. "My view is that leading and mentoring is a two-way street," says Alan Fohrer, CEO of Southern California Edison. "I take great pleasure in mentoring our team—in return I learn a lot from them. But this only works if one listens as intensely as one gives advice."

The Perfect Balance

Mentors and coaches are not to be revered or put on a pedestal. It is the very recognition of their own failures and vulnerabilities, along with their successes

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and strengths that makes them ideal coaches and mentors. The less egocentric they are and the more willing they are to show of themselves, the more effective they will be in facilitating the professional and personal growth of others. Many organizations today overemphasize the need for leaders to be aggressive achievers, get-the-job-done and take-no-prisoners kinds of people. Really great leaders exhibit these qualities when the situation requires it, but balance them with softer qualities of being self-reflective and being able to articulate lessons learned,

both positive and negative. Their greatness lies in not being in the game merely for personal advancement, but to meet organizational goals through helping others grow and succeed. ■

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