



Trust-centered Leadership

Since Tom Peters published *In Search of Excellence* in the early Nineteen Eighties, business leadership and strategy have become hot topics on the shelves of our nation's bookstores and in real world boardrooms.

There are numerous models that propose anywhere from three to a half-dozen or so types of leadership and dissect them by attitude, behavior and outcome. With so much to read and think about, the quest for clarity can founder. After more than thirty years as a business person, leadership consultant and life coach, I've become a devotee of the "less is more" way of doing things. So what I'm going to offer here is, I hope, a very simple set of coordinates that are easy to remember and orient to. Rather than look at leadership from the perspective of the leader's options—which is what most models do—I want to suggest it makes more sense to look at it through the eyes of the followers. After all, what is a leader without followers?

So here's the operating principle: Great leadership is ultimately defined by a capacity to embody the very highest calling of your followership. What does this mean?

Well, we are talking here about followership in a society that believes in democracy, diversity, a cherishing of individual gifts as well as the gratifying potentials of collaboration with others. We're also assuming that in such a society you, as the leader, want to draw forth to your cause or business the brightest, most talented, most committed people you can find for every single position. What do these people want and need from a leader? They want him or her to bring out the best in them. How can this be done? The answer has three parts, each with the same core.

First, their talents will flower for someone whose basic decency they trust, someone who believes in being fair, open, honest, caring of the individual and the greater good of the group. Let's call this **Trust of Heart.**

Second, they will follow someone whose sense of vision of the organization is trustworthy. By vision, we include the kind of group culture the person wants to create as well as the business strategy. By extension, this trust embraces a clear sense of the kind of personality-talent bundles you're looking for in every position, from department heads on down, as well as ideas about the Four E's: Entrepreneurship, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Empathy. Let's call this **Trust of Vision.**

Third, diverse talents and personalities need to have faith in their leader's ability to turn his heart and vision into congruent and timely action. It isn't enough to be a wonderful, caring person. It isn't enough to be a wonderful, caring person who has a beautiful vision of how to create a high-performance community that fully honors the humanity of the individuals that comprise it. Leadership is an action verb. It must deliver and do so consistently with a steady hand. Let's call this **Trust of Stewardship.**

To complete the thought, we must also state the converse that it's not enough to just be a person of action. Actions must embody the kind of heart and vision that make people eager to get out of bed in the morning. In other words, *each of these three is necessary but not sufficient unto itself to engender great leadership.* The three are really one with trust at the center and in great leadership, they unfold with equal vigor.

Now, if you spend some time thinking about these Three Trusts of Leadership, you'll begin to realize that whatever previous model you've looked at—whether from Peters, W. Edwards Deming, Peter Drucker, Jim Collins, Warren Bennis, John Kotter, Robert Greenleaf, James O'Toole, Daniel Goleman, Robert Quinn, Michael Hammer, Jack Welch, Andrew Grove or any number of other business thinkers—they all fit here. However, it is important to reiterate that ultimately, leadership is about service to followers first and foremost. When it becomes oriented predominantly in another direction, it is likely to falter at some future point.

Each of the Three Trusts has its own field of competencies, some of them overlapping, to be sure. We can take a more detailed look into these at another time. But for now, let's get right to the essence.

For people to trust your Heart, your gifts and skills must be strong in what is now called Emotional Intelligence.

- Know yourself, be yourself, allow yourself to be known.
- Speak your truth and speak it consistently.
- Connect well with others.
- Err on the side of over-communicating.
- Listen to them, see them, inspire, grow and guide them with unfailing empathy.
- Be humble and give away credit for accomplishment.
- Be willing to openly and sincerely apologize as soon as you realize you've erred.
- Be willing to ask for help, recognizing you can't do it all yourself.

For people to trust your Vision, your talents and competencies must be strong in...

- The spirit of inquiry...conducting yourself as an eternal student.
- Big picture thinking.
- Synthesizing the best ideas in the air at any given moment.
- Strategy development.
- Entrepreneurial imagination.
- Listening.
- Consistently inviting participation and co-authorship.
- Communicating with clarity.

It's worth saying a bit more about the necessary communication skills to win trust in your vision. You must be confident enough to allow people to see in detail how your mind works, where your ideas come from, how you developed as a human being and how that development serves you in formulating a view of the future and how to get there.

For people to trust your Stewardship, you must...

- Consistently go the final yard to the goal line and get the job done.
- Possess a strong intuitive capacity for making tough decisions with appropriate input in a timely manner.
- Focus your passion for living your Heart and Vision.
- Have an advanced talent for hiring great people, coaching them and delegating responsibilities equal to their maturity and skills.
- Be firm and demanding but never mean-spirited.
- Have conviction but at the same time are capable of flexibility and adaptation.
- Stay the course in the face of temporary set-backs...not lurch from pillar to post based on short-term developments.

Stewardship skills comprise what Dr. W. Edwards Deming “constancy of purpose”. Put simply, great leaders execute, execute, execute. They have a passion for results, hire people who share it and create an environment in which collaboration is as ever-present as oxygen. Congruency is a key factor in all of this. If you say you really care about people but are mean-spirited and down-putting, you will sacrifice all Three Trusts. If you say you want your people to have rich personal and family lives but establish or tolerate eighty hour work weeks, you will sacrifice all Three Trusts. Through direct experience, people will come to see you as a hypocrite. The same would be true if you espouse openness and participation but dominate meetings with your own ideas...or if you talk up innovation but lack the courage to take a chance on a bold new idea...or if you espouse commitment to a comprehensive strategy but then lurch reactively away from it every time things don’t turn out as you hoped. The Three Trusts challenge you to keep asking these fundamental questions that will ultimately determine your degree of success as a leader.

- What inspires trust in my **Heart?**
- What inspires trust in my **Vision?**
- What inspires trust in my **Stewardship?**

These questions open a space in which a leader can realize his or her greatest potential, because they call the individual to be authentic and authoritative, to communicate clearly, consistently and empathetically about the current state of the organization, what a good job looks like in any given position and where you are in terms of achieving our goals at any given moment. They also call the leader to respect people for who they are and nurture them from that point forward.

There is no better example of leadership embodying the Three Trusts in American political life over the last fifty years than when President John F. Kennedy publicly took full responsibility for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Kennedy learned his lessons well, a fact that was lost on the Russian premier, Khrushchev. Not long afterwards, when the Russians were caught trying to secretly set up missile bases in Cuba, they encountered a JFK who was much sharper and clearer, mobilized all the brilliant people at his disposal and threaded the needle of excruciatingly difficult decisions brilliantly. The Russians backed down and a potential nuclear war was averted.

Trust-centered Leadership applies to any setting and any endeavor. It reminds you that you must constantly work to be worthy of your followers, for without them you are left to the limited results possible when you lead your life alone. You can use the three questions to check yourself not only as a workplace leader, but as a parent, spouse, friend, teacher or coach.

Great leadership is a complex and continuous dance. But these Three Trusts and the obvious accompanying questions can serve as touchstones to make it far easier. You’ll find the more familiar you become with this lean model, the more you will experience the personal creative power that is the hallmark of people who successfully use the role of leader to realize the fullness of their humanity.

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