Paper #5085

How to be a Leader in the Information Technology Field

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I've read many books on leadership all espousing different theories about the do's and don'ts. It can be overwhelming sometimes and leave you wondering just what to do, or which path to follow. Today we're going to work with these principles ourselves and discover what may work for us. As I said in the abstract, one does not have to be a manager to be a leader. An entry level programmer can demonstrate leadership qualities just as well as the IT Director, and that will certainly assist them in their career paths. So this presentation applies to all people at all levels, and can help each of us achieve our goals and objectives.

I.   HYPOTHESIS: One must be a professional before they can become a true leader.

      Exercise: What characteristics describe a professional to you? How do you know when you see one or talk to one?

II. Now that we have some characteristics to look for, let me share some stories. See if you can identify the characteristics that these stories have in common with your list.

      When Charles Cumello, the former CEO of Waldenbooks took over that company, it was in bad shape. Waldenbooks was trying to capture its market share by having the widest selections and the most books of any chain. It wasn't working. They were getting excellent foot-traffic, but their ratio of sales per customer just wasn't cutting it. Customers were looking but not buying. Cumello didn't know **what** to do, but he was going to do **something**, and if that didn't work, he would do something else.

      To figure out what to do, he bailed out of corporate HQ and dived into the trenches. He started working the cash registers at a number of Waldenbooks outlets.

      Once he was actually in the front lines, he could clearly identify the primary problem. Customer service. Customers were wandering in and wandering out in a daze, overwhelmed by the wide selection that had initially attracted them. To change that, Cumello instituted a new policy that every store employee had to address every customer within 10 feet and help them find what they wanted.

      The results? Nothing! Sales stayed flat. For Cumello, it was back to the stores to find out why this strategy wasn't working. And he found out.

The store executives - the managers and assistant managers were telling their clerks to carry out the policy, but the executives weren't taking part in the program themselves. Hustling customers, one by one, was beneath their dignity. Not worth their very important time.

What was the message then that they were sending to the floor-level clerks? That the policy didn't really matter. So nobody was doing it, at least, not with any zest or conviction.

Cumello started going store to store again and showing every clerk, every manager and assistant manager exactly how he wanted them to approach each customer. Day after day, he hustled books, one-on-one. Word got around to every store in the chain. With the CEO doing this, the managers no longer saw it beneath their dignity, and started to comply with the policy. Soon the rest of the people fell in line.

Sales figures started to balloon, sales-per-ratio grew, and in 2 years, the company did a complete turnaround in customer service earning them a #1 position in customer surveys.

All this happened because Charlie Cumello had **led from the front,** getting in the trenches to discover the problem, then figuring out how to fix it, and setting the example for others to follow.

Another story that illustrates not one, but many leadership qualities is one that I heard first hand while scuba diving off a desert island. I had a fascinating discussion with the CEO of Nielsen Company. He related his own story of how he and the new management team turned this company around after the previous 3 management teams failed. When asked how he did this, and what was different from the previous teams, he stated that the first thing they did was to **communicate** with everyone about how the company was doing. He discovered that no one had been **honest** with the employees before, and they really didn't know how bad a situation the company was in. Then after meeting with everyone to communicate this message, they told them what their plans were. But more importantly, they **did** what they said they were going to do. They talked the talk and walked the walk. And finally, they held the belief that the employees wand to do the right thing, and they **trusted** them to do it. What I also noticed about talking to this man was his **passion** for what he was doing. He truly loved his work, the people he worked with, and what he was accomplishing. A leader can often inspire others simply by the passion they exhibit in their job. By following a few of the basic leadership qualities, this management team achieved what 3 different management teams before couldn't.

So what leadership traits have we discovered in these stories?

III. Exercise: Let's do another exercise that I believe is rather revealing. Based on surveys of more than 15,000 people, which of the following traits do you think was selected as the key to effective leadership?:

- Being forward-looking?
- Being inspirational?
- Being honest?
- Being competent?

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If you guessed "honest" you get a gold star. It scored **far above** any of the others in a list of 20. These four characteristics were the top four, and these were the percentages of people that selected them.

87% Honest
71% Forward-looking
68% Inspirational
58% Competent

Honest people have credibility, and that's what gives leaders the trust and confidence of their people. High credibility leaders foster such things as greater pride in the organization, a stronger spirit of cooperation and teamwork, and more feelings of ownership and personal responsibility.

IV. We've identified 9 leadership traits that are of significance. Now how do we develop them in ourselves?

   a. Walk the talk
   b. Trust the people
   c. Lead from the front
   d. Communicate
   e. Inspire
   f. Be organized
   g. Create synergy
   h. Be competent
   i. Have passion

A. Walk the talk

Walking the talk or "doing what you say you're going to do" is a real demonstration of honesty. By keeping your promises and following through on your commitments, you're showing your integrity and your honesty, and people will be more likely to follow you and do what you want them to do. It's really the little things that you consistently do that will highlight you as a leader in other's eyes.

B. Trust

Believe in the inherent self-worth of others and trust that they want to do the right thing. This creates a climate of openness where there is true empowerment and delegation. That leads to feelings of self esteem and accomplishment and everyone wins. Also, good leaders don't tell **how** to do something, they give guidelines of what and when and allow their subordinates the freedom to achieve it however they see fit. When you empower someone, be sure to allow for mistakes and encourage learning from those mistakes. Tom Peters said the most competitive companies were those that would make their mistakes the fastest, learn from them and move on.

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C. Lead from the front

Leading from the front encompasses many characteristics, It's setting an example for others to follow. It's not asking someone to do something you wouldn't be willing to do. It's not being too proud to pitch in to help like the CEO of Waldenbooks. It's also being decisive and giving clear direction. It's up to you to take charge!

D. Communicate

It's amazing what you might learn from others by simply communicating with them. Asking the people who are closest to the problem about how to solve it, might give you just the clue you need. Some good basics of communication are being an attentive listener, and more importantly following the statement "seek first to understand, then to be understood". Take responsibility for your communication so that others understand what you're trying to say. Communication is complex, but by telling people "why" you're doing something and then keeping them informed of what's going on, you will empower them and make them feel a part of what's happening. The most powerful 2 sentences that a leader can communicate are: "I was wrong" and "I'm sorry". People will follow a leader who admits their mistakes and apologizes instead of blaming someone else, or covering up.

E. Inspires

How does a leader inspire? Being optimistic and pulling positives from negatives will often make a difference. Encouraging new ideas instead of resisting change. Giving credit instead of taking credit. Setting high standards and recognizing people's success. There are so many little things one can do to inspire, just pick one and work on it.

F. Be organized

It's been said that wars are won in the general's tent. Organizing keeps things on track, and ensures that critical ideas are implemented. If you are not an organized person, appoint someone who is to help you with those critical areas. Begin with the end in mind and mentally organize how to accomplish the end goal. This will better the changes of seeing your vision implemented. Establish goals that are meaningful and make sure that everyone understands their role in the goals.

G. Create synergy

What is synergy? Webster defines it as ". . . combined action or functioning". My belief is that synergy happens when people have unity of purpose, and can share ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

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Although it's comfortable and tempting, if you surround yourself with only similar thinking people, you will most likely lose an opportunity to create synergy. It is in valuing the differences in people and building on each other's strengths that you create a synergistic group. I personally witnessed the success of this with a group that I led which had a mix of visionaries, implementers and catalysts to get things going. Each person contributed in their own way and were essential to the group because of their differences.

Another important aspect of this is unity. If everyone has their "own agenda" the group will become fragmented. This is where the "whole is greater than the sum of it's parts". With everyone striving to achieve the big picture, synergy can be created and maintained.

H. Be competent

This seems like a no-brainer because everyone may think they're competent. But how many people work hard to learn better management skills, learn their craft or profession, and strive to stay on top of the curve. There are many "Peter Principle" managers out there who have truly reached the level of their incompetence. And there are many technical leaders who are not good managers. Take the time and effort to achieve competence in whatever you do. It's been said that adding "just a little bit" of effort will set you apart from the rest of the pack. As a leader, you don't have all the answers. Just be resourceful to know how to find them.

I. Passion

Do you ever see a really inspirational, respected, competent leader who is not passionate about what they do? That passion rubs off on the people around them, and can help leaders achieve their goals. It's what attracts people to the leader in the first place. You know it when you see it, and it does make a difference.