

Daring to Lead

by Karen Ayas & Phil Mirvis

So much has been said on leadership, yet we dare say more. There still is a need for developing a next generation of leaders determined to leave this world a better place than they found it.

Everyone has had the opportunity to lead at some point. The question is what happens with these opportunities—when we choose to take action and when we let the chance pass.

We will argue that everyone can be leader. Some may naturally be more effective than others, given their personality and skills, but ultimately, anyone can decide to lead. Leadership is a choice; that choice comes with huge responsibility and takes courage.

Courage is the single most critical element of leadership: courage to think and act differently; courage to challenge the process; courage to face yourself and your fears; courage to push others beyond their comfort zone; courage to listen even if you don't like what's being said; courage to risk being a fool for something you deeply believe in. And the list goes on.

Perhaps the simplest definition of leadership we have encountered is, "Rising to the occasion." This requires deep listening skills to identify the occasion and timely action to pursue what the occasion is calling for.

This, in turn, requires knowing yourself, your strengths and your blind spots. Under what circumstances are you capable of taking timely action? When or why do you miss the occasion? What do you see? What do you fail to see?

Rising to the occasion also requires extraordinary sensing skills, anticipating the opportunity, being aware of the signals and open to future possibilities. It requires an understanding of what makes you come alive, so that you can inspire and influence others to do good.

How to Become a Daring Leader

Here we discuss four essential dimensions of leadership development:

- Cultivating self-awareness
- Connecting to the Other
- Forming a community
- Discovering our purpose

Cultivating Self-Awareness: Who am I?

Most branches of psychology see self-knowledge as integral to human development and essential to life as a healthy, functioning adult. A number of studies document how self-consciousness expands when people understand their familial roots and formative experiences—what moves them and puts them off—as well as their highest hopes and deepest fears. Much of this fits into the rubric of “emotional intelligence,” which means, among other things, being in touch with one’s makeup and proclivities, moods and emotions, and being able to recognize personal strengths, weaknesses, and impact on others (Goleman).

Not surprisingly, leadership development programs in many companies encourage employees to cultivate emotional intelligence through personality assessments, 360-degree feedback, regular coaching, and the like. While these all have their place in personal development, we favor less structured means of promoting self-awareness among leaders. One approach involves personal reflection and story-telling about one’s life experiences and lessons (Mirvis & Ayas). Biographical studies by psychologist Howard Gardner underscore this point by showing that formative experiences shape the beliefs and practices of leaders in almost every culture. They make up the leader’s identity. The leaders have also been encouraged to convey their life lessons to their people. The telling of identity stories, Gardner finds, builds deep connections between leaders and followers and, in particular, informs the identities of younger leaders.

Self-discovery and disclosure are a part of every leader’s work in our programs. Most leaders in companies we have worked with have written and shared their life stories with one another. “It’s like a surgery of the soul: you begin to see the roots and patterns,” says one young leader about this form of self-reflection, “and you understand what truly moves you.”

Emotional release plays a key role in the personal disclosure process. As one participant describes:

I had always been taught that open display of emotions was a sign of weakness. The credo of my clan is, “Men are born to face the challenges of this world. They do not cry. They are the pride of their family and must not fail.” This was drummed into me since I was a little boy. Till now, I had been trying to live up to this myth of invincibility even though I knew that I didn’t have all the answers. I could not share my emotions and my fears with even my family. Now I realize how much more I could have done if only I had sought the emotional support that I knew was there all along.

This kind of introspection is based in Freud’s psychodynamic notion that people re-experience their lives when they delve into the most emotionally charged aspects of their past. It helps to surface unexamined and repressed feelings about one’s life course and to lift them up for fresh consideration. There are, of course, other means of knowing the self

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in other traditions. Many of the Asian leaders, for example, turn to prayer, yoga, journaling, or meditation to explore their “inner selves.” Who we are is not the persona, the role, the mask that others see; our essence lies deep within. Deep questioning and self-transcendence yields “spiritual power” that can be used to transform relationships with others. Says one leader:

I am really passionate about our intent to truly understand who we are. It never occurred to me to place such importance on meeting our soul consciousness. Only then can you travel on a journey upwards. Answering this question will give me greater control over my mind and body, and that is where the power lies. Self-realization and positive change are the vehicles into the future.

Connecting to the Other: Who are You?

Self-consciousness is essential to connecting to others, as only those who know themselves are able to understand and forge mutual ties with the individuals around them. In turn, through trying to understand another person, people come to better understand themselves. Putting yourself in the place of others is central to socialization and the formation of identity; hence, it is highly relevant to developing the character of leaders.

Human relations training, common in organizational behavior curricula, stresses the importance of “knowing the other” as a key competency of leaders. Witnessing the telling of another’s personal story is one means of cultivating this insight. Still, in the competitive culture of business, it is difficult to “lower the guard,” as one leader put it. “The initial step of sharing personal information was difficult,” he recalled, “but once you sense the value of truly connecting, building on it seemed relatively easy.” It is important to engage in the search and the inquiry into each other’s cultures and mindsets. To achieve this, one has to understand one’s own basic core values, and accept other people’s differences “as is.” This acceptance needs to be sincere and from the heart, without any prejudice, judgments, or expectations.

In a leadership journey to China, for instance, leaders spent time “getting into the skin” of villagers. In the ancient hamlet of Xin Ping, the leaders worked alongside local people going about their daily lives—sweeping streets, herding buffalo, forming cement blocks, cooking noodles, and teaching. One commented:

My experience “living” with the villagers was an eye opener. I was fortunate to be with a 72-year-old who had the energy of a 40-year-old woman. During the late 30’s to early 40’s she, together with young ladies at that time, made sandals out of dried grass straw for Chinese soldiers. She narrated to us with enthusiasm how important these sandals were to protect the soldier’s feet from crossing marshlands and hiking mountains, even during cold winter nights. Her simple understanding of the “big picture” and her role struck me... that no matter how small your role is... it is still part of the whole.

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Attention also turned to understanding what makes others tick and how they relate to their world. An Australian leader elaborated on the impact: “It’s helping us develop empathy, to put yourself in the other person’s shoes—that could be your customer, your colleague, or one of your managers. You step outside of your own paradise and get a deep understanding that the way we do things is not the only way.”

Various learning tools such as the ladder of inference can help leaders explore what is behind their perceptions and feelings (c.f., Argyris, Senge). Recent interest in an appreciative style of leading has emphasized the positive potential of finding the goodness the other and improving the quality of human relationships (Cooperrider).

“Our visit to Dharamshala (Indian home of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees) moved me. I saw how deeply integrated Buddhist philosophy is in their lives,” reported one leader on the trip to India. “I have never seen such a deep level of a religion in action with such passion. As a Buddhist myself, I realized how serene my life would be if I really made it a part of my life and that of my family as well.”

Forming a Community: Who are We?

Naturally, rich experiences of connecting with others emotionally and spiritually make their way into the collective consciousness of the leadership group. Forming the leaders into a work community engages what Peck calls a “group mind”—the ability of a collective to see both its constituent parts and the whole. His theories contend that this mindfulness develops organically through free-flowing conversation among a collection of people as they pay close attention to their own thoughts and feelings and to the events in the group overall.

Large group discussions as a community, with everyone sitting in a circle and given the opportunity to speak, irrespective of rank or tenure, can help develop collective sensibilities. The expectation is set to speak openly and frankly, and to deal with the difficult issues that would otherwise be avoided or denied. There is also space for observations about how the collective is operating and periodic moments of silence so that leaders can reflect quietly on what has been said and what they want to say next.

Getting to this collective mind, as with all group development processes, is marked by conflict and paradoxes. The groups’ first experiences with dialogue can be difficult and very frustrating. What helps the process mature? More time together, familiarity with one another, and a degree of psychological safety established from past encounters. No doubt, the sharing of personal stories and in-the-moment thoughts and feelings helps to break down barriers. With time and practice, leaders, regardless of nationality, will learn to build on each other’s comments, challenge each other gracefully, and encourage new voices to emerge. The leadership body can serve as a kind of “container” that holds differences and conflicts up for ongoing exploration.

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In the case of Unilever, the Asian leadership community has evolved to a stage where leaders can talk about sensitive and emotional subjects, like “saving face,” and confront the assumptions and cultural values behind each other’s points of views. The power of uniting has had a palpable effect on the leaders. They no longer refer to one another as simply colleagues; instead, they call each other friends. Reflecting on this state, one leader commented:

I feel very close to the Asia group. There was some weird sense of bonding that developed even though I didn’t know more than half of the people. I really can’t explain it, but it was a sense of oneness or being together. It is strange because I felt this when weren’t even talking. It was a nice feeling. For the first time I experienced it outside my family. Maybe this is what we call community feeling.

Discovering our Purpose: Why are We Here?

Feelings of connection and communion, inclusive as they might seem, focus on the internal characteristics of leaders and their community. What about their roles and responsibilities in the larger world?

In principle, knowledge of economic, social, and environmental conditions can be gleaned from text, talks, and conversations in any forum. But the experience of being there and seeing first-hand has a much greater potential to raise collective consciousness about conditions in the world. The question of purpose should be raised progressively, but it is a critical element of the leader’s development. For instance, time spent in the natural world can help open eyes to the need to live with, rather than take from, the natural world. This, in turn, can lead to calls to incorporate criteria of environmental sustainability into strategic and operating plans of any business.

In the case of Unilever, an imperative emerged over the course of several years: the leaders had to flesh out their caring aspirations and translate them into a business mission that would emphasize the healthy, nourishing aspects of food. Accordingly, the Asian leaders pledged to become responsible partners with the people of Asia, and to address the health, vitality, and development of children and families through better foods and beverages. They also pledged to be actively involved in communities, and especially to understand and respond to the needs of children and the economically underprivileged.

On a personal note, one leader stated, “I started getting the feeling that my work need not be confined to producing and selling as efficiently as possible: it has a higher purpose of community service to the people of Asia.” “This changes the paradigm of thinking that we are selling to consumers,” said another one. “Instead, we are serving our communities.”