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Unlocking the Leader Within: You're 5 Steps Away

David Naylor, Executive Vice President, 2logical



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The process of becoming a great leader is far too often shrouded in mystery. It is almost as if many believe that great leadership is the outgrowth of a secret combination of black magic and divine intervention. This limiting misconception frequently causes people to mistakenly overlook the simple truths that exist right before their eyes.

Within these truths can be found five simple steps followed by successful individuals throughout history to help them evolve from being people with a problem, to great leaders with a solution.

Step One in Becoming a Great Leader:

Recognizing that Leadership is all about Learning

The genesis of the light bulb came about when Thomas Edison came to the realization that you could use electricity to generate light. The genesis of the polio vaccine came about when Jonas Salk came to the realization that you could use a deactivated virus to create immunity in the human body. The genesis for the internet came about when Al Gore (okay, Al Gore didn't really invent the internet, however, he did sponsor legislation that helped it along).

The point is, the genesis of everything of magnitude comes about from a singular realization. The genesis of becoming a great leader comes about from the fundamental realization that *Leadership is not born to some and not to others, it is a learned set of behaviors driven by optimal beliefs.*

Many might argue that leaders are born not made. However, the facts just don't support that conclusion. In the 1990s, with advancements in powerful, high speed computing, scientists set out on the Human Genome Project.



genetic base pairs that make up the virtual blueprint of a human being. Through this process, they have come to understand how genetics play a role in the color of our eyes, how tall we are likely to grow and our predisposition to certain hereditary diseases. One thing that scientist have never been able to isolate in the human genome is the leadership gene. *Leadership is not born to some and not to others, it is a learned set of behaviors driven by optimal beliefs.*

Step Two in Becoming a Great Leader:

Recognizing and Leveraging Leadership Moments

Like the line in the Oscar award winning movie, Forrest Gump, “stupid is as stupid does”; *Leadership is as leadership does.* Every day, all around us are opportunities to lead. These leadership opportunities present themselves in virtually every conversation and interaction we have with another person. Each of these provides us with the opportunity to recognize someone’s accomplishment, to thank them for a job well done, to help them see meaning and significance in something they are doing, to demonstrate how much potential we see in them or to challenge a limiting belief that may be holding them back.

At home, at work, in our community, leadership opportunities abound. However, to be a leader, you have to act like a leader - consistently. *Leadership is as leadership does.* What you do, how you act, what you say each day matters!” Great leaders seize the opportunity that has been placed in their hands to do it right, to do it with care and to do it with respect for the role.

Step Three in Becoming a Great Leader:

Recognizing that Leadership is about Helping People Get What They Want

For any coach, twenty consecutive winning seasons is an impressive accomplishment. In the NFL it has only happened once, a record that has stood for nearly three decades. It is held by Tom Landry, legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys, who was once asked about how he was able to so successfully lead his team to victory, Landry replied, “*The job of a leader is to get people to do what they don’t want to do, so that they can have what they want to have.*”

Telling people what to do or even how to do it, is easy. Managers do it every day and then they sit back and get frustrated because not enough people do what they are told to do. Telling people is easy, it’s getting them to execute that’s the challenge.

So how do great leaders like Tom Landry get people to do what they don’t want to do? The answer to this age old question lies in the last part of Landry’s quote, “...*so that they can have what they want to have.*” People do not do what you tell them to do; they embrace what they feel is in their best interest, and they master and execute on what we, as leaders inspire, motivate and help them come to believe they can do.

Step Four in Becoming a Great Leader:

Recognizing that your Greatest Leadership Tool is Communication

Throughout history there have been thousands of leaders who have helped shape the world as we know it. Even still, amongst all those individuals, there are certain leaders who stand out. In the world of politics these standouts would include Winston Churchill, Mohandas Gandhi, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. In the world of social change we have Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King. In the world of business, we have standout leaders such as Lee Iacocca and Jack Welch. The real question is, what distinguishes these leaders from all the rest?

Certainly each inspired change on a massive magnitude, but how? Upon close inspection, each of these iconic leaders shared an expertise, a common skillset that allowed them to have an infinitely greater impact – they were all incredible communicators.

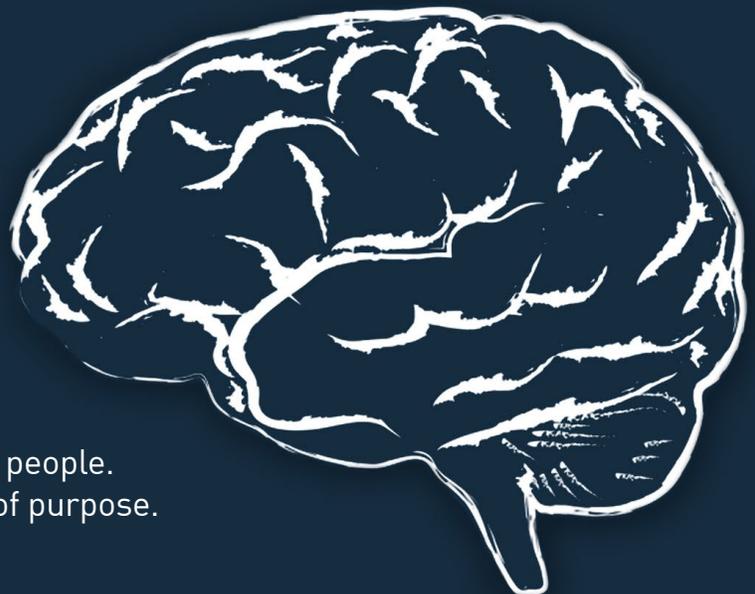
As children we all learn to communicate with others. First, we learn to make sounds and then to shape those sounds into words. Later, we learned to connect those words into sentences and we were able to communicate with other people. Great leaders understand, however, that words offers far more than the power to communicate, they offer the power to *align*, to *reinforce*, to *inspire* and to *unshackle*.

What differentiates the most impactful leaders from the rest is that they consistently communicate a vision that people *align* around. This vision establishes the destination, it defines a sense purpose and it creates relevance for the goals. Leaders who fail to consistently communicate on this level invariably end up with disengaged, unmotivated teams who are constantly second guessing the goals.

With the vision firmly anchored, next great leaders leverage their words to consistently *reinforce* the goals and strategies. Too often, goals and strategies only come up at the beginning and end of the process. They are discussed at the beginning to introduce them and create something to plan around. Later at the end, goals and strategies come up in the evaluation phase, “did we make our goals and, did the strategies get executed?”

What happens in the middle? If leaders don't communicate in a way that constantly *reinforces* the goals and strategies, consistently tying them to the realization of the vision, people can easily feel like the goals are a flavor of the day, the latest shiny object that has caught the eye of their boss. This mindset easily allows them to discount the importance of the goals and focus on something that is easier for them to accomplish.

Next great leaders use their words to *inspire* their people. People feel *inspired* when they have a high sense of purpose.



They feel *inspired* when they understand the “why” behind what they are doing. They feel inspired when the actions they are taking have meaning and impact. People feel *inspired* when they feel like they are making a real difference in some significant way.

Last but certainly not least, great leaders use their ability to communicate to *unshackle* their people.

Sadly, many people hold wide reaching misconceptions regarding their abilities. These self-limiting thoughts encumber them, shackle them and confine them to a self-imposed mediocrity. Great leaders help people to see past this restricted viewpoint by always talking to them about what they can become, about the untapped potential they see within them.

Step Five in Becoming a Great Leader:

Recognizing that Every Day You Get to Practice Being a Leader

Practice, practice, practice. If as discussed earlier, *leadership is not born to some and not to others, it is a learned set of behaviors driven by optimal beliefs*. Then like all things in life, leadership must be practiced to be honed and perfected. Like in all things learned, mistakes will be made in this process.

In the process of learning to walk, the average child will fall down 240 to 280 times. Do they give up? Do they quit trying? Do they ever think to themselves, “maybe mom and dad are meant to walk and I’m meant to crawl?” No, they persist. They willingly pay the dues necessary to master one of life’s essential skillsets. Learning to lead is no different.

We become great at something by applying what we have been taught, too soon and too often, rather than too late and not enough. It is not enough to merely understand these *five steps to unlocking the leader within* it is important to embrace them, practice them, and reflect on how you can do them better. If you do this, you will be a better, more proficient leader tomorrow than you are today. If you create the habit of embracing these steps, practicing and reflecting each day, you improve each day. When you string enough of those types of days together, you begin to get good. If you continue to follow the pattern, one day, you just might wake up and find that you have become - a great leader.

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