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THE INNER EDGE: HOW PERSONAL LEADERSHIP CAN IMPROVE PERFORMANCE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

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What do leaders do when their stock price has dropped 75% and it's their job to get it back up?

What should leaders think when the thrilling vision they had for the future has been clouded by economic uncertainty?

How do leaders get inspired when their employees are dejected, worried, and distracted – and let's face it, on some level so are they?

Wait – don't answer that. You can't. Because no matter how much you know about leadership, regardless of what the research says or what best practice implies, there's only one way to find the right answers to these questions. Leaders need to find them for themselves.

In a time of unprecedented challenge, leaders don't just need to lead their companies. They also need to lead themselves. They need strategies for improving their effectiveness while sustaining a sense of professional well-being. Every one of us has an internal source of strength and stability. Without care and consideration these renewable resources are seriously at risk.

Successful leaders know that. Listen to the words of leaders who value the personal side of leadership.

“Leadership is personal. Management is personal. There's something very powerful about bringing your whole self to work.” -Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook

“If you can get your talents and passions to align with the organizational need, you're really in a position when you can maximize contribution to company and achieve your career best.” -David Kilby, Director of Intel University, Intel

“As leaders it's time to dig deep personally. There are a lot of people out there that are frozen. It's a time to create a new future, and we can't do it if we can't think clearly.”
-Lisa Weber, President, Individual Business, MetLife

In order to survive and thrive, leaders can't just go about business as usual. Business isn't “usual” anymore. It's undergoing a seismic shift. Leaders need to get their footing in a shaky reality and learn to embrace the possibilities ahead.

DEFINING PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

Personal leadership is the leadership of the self. In addition to the visible and interactive work of leadership that no organization can live without, personal leadership is the private, introspective part of leadership that takes place within.

In a positive, unselfish way, personal leadership means putting oneself first. Literally speaking, personal means ‘about you;’ leadership means ‘coming first.’ It is so essential to leadership that renowned management expert Peter Drucker once called it “the only leadership that’s going to matter in the 21st century.”ⁱ

The process involves asking oneself reflective questions to stay aligned and integrated with their sense of self. Who are you as a leader? Who do you want to be? What do you hope to achieve, and how will you achieve it? What strengths do you bring to your role? What contributions do you want to make, and who will support you along the way? When you practice personal leadership, you lead from the inside out.

I call it the *inner edge*.

LIVING AND LEADING ON THE EDGE

Every leader has an inner and an outer edge. The *inner* edge is the leader behind the scenes: your thoughts and motivations, your aspirations, your plans, your decisions, your strengths and weaknesses, your values, and your way of becoming a success. The *outer* edge is the leader as shown to the world: your words, your actions, and your interactions with the people around you.

Your inner and outer edges are intimately related. The relationship is nicely illustrated by a geographical symbol called the Möbius Strip (shown in Figure 1). The Möbius strip is a seamless circle twisted so that as you trace your finger around the loop, the inner side becomes the outer side, and outer turns to inner.

Figure 1: The Möbius strip



Leaders’ thoughts and feelings (their “inner edge”) influence their effectiveness in their roles, and their actions and interactions (their “outer edge”) in turn shape their life. Just as on a Möbius strip, as the two sides of oneself become integrated, the inner edge becomes the outer edge and the outer edge becomes the inner. Distinct parts and partitions start to disappear as life becomes “one harmonious whole.”

Spending time on the inner edge is an essential way for leaders to preserve their performance in challenging times. Those challenging times might involve the economic issues as we've seen of late (budget cuts, layoffs, bankruptcy) or the stressors of organizational growth (the speed of change, the influences of technology, cultural dynamics, the need for renewable talent). By any measure, these are in fact challenging times for business leaders.

But even when the economy is strong, many leaders live in constant change. Simply by virtue of being leaders, they find themselves taking on new challenges, new responsibilities, and new projects. Leaders are people who set high goals and exceed them. They strive for excellence, even exceptionality. They are never satisfied with the status quo but constantly strive to be better, do more, and get better results. So for many who would call themselves leaders, the times are *always* a challenge.

That level of intensity can be hard to maintain. Over time, leaders can become taxed by the burden of leadership. Some burn out. Others spin out of control. Some lose their sense of self. How can leaders sustain their performance over time when the pressures are so great? How can they find the ongoing renewal and restoration they need to be their best? These are questions no one can answer for leaders. They must learn to answer them for themselves.

That's where personal leadership comes in.

APPLYING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES TO ONESELF

To practice personal leadership is to take the practices of leadership more generally and apply them to oneself.

Take for example, the leadership practice of visioning. Visioning is so vital that it is practically the prerequisite Chapter One in any book on the subject of leadership. Leaders of all kinds must have a clear vision to succeed. They need to know where their organization is going and why, and they need to communicate that vision clearly at all levels inside the organization and out.

But on a more personal level, leaders must also have a vision for *themselves*. At the level of the leader, visioning becomes something different than that longstanding vision that has to stand the test of time. It becomes something more fluid, more intuitive, and more flexible. It is a vision that changes as they change, but with consistent themes over time. The goal is not for a leader to establish one clear and permanent vision but to learn the skill of getting clarity about their vision again and again.

For example, Glenn was an operations executive in a global medical equipment firm who had gotten overwhelmed by the pace of change in his company, which was growing exponentially, and his personal life, in which he was supporting aging parents. He had begun to be plagued with the big existential questions, like, "What am I doing?" and "What's it all for?" By using visioning techniques as a way of finding clarity, he was able to discern what he wanted for himself as a

leader, a son, an aspirational executive, and a person. As his circumstances continued to change, he learned to reconnect with clarity about his own personal vision – one that helped him to both be a better leader and lead a better life.

In personal leadership, all of the practices of leadership have a counterpart at the individual level. You can see how these practices translate in the figure entitled “An Overview of Personal Leadership.”

AN OVERVIEW OF PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

Organizational Leadership	Personal Leadership
Visioning	Getting Clarity
Strategic Planning	Finding Focus
Action Planning	Taking Effective Action
Role Assignments, Succession Planning	Seeing One’s Own Brilliance
Benefits, Compensation, Bonuses	Feeling Fulfillment
Time Management	Maximizing Time
Departments, Teams	Personal Support Team
Leadership Development Programs	Personalized Learning
Processes, Deadlines, Systems	Seeing Possibility
Work vs. Self	Alignment and Integration

Here are a few more examples:

- *Strategic planning* is the process organizations use to break down a vision into specifics so it can be implemented throughout the organization.
- *Finding focus* is the process individuals use to zero in on their vision one priority at a time so it can flex and expand in the midst of change.
- *Time management* is the traditional approach to helping people in organizations do more with time.
- *Maximizing time* is the paradigm of personal leadership, where leaders learn to do more with less (and still have time left over for themselves).
- Organizations tend to focus on making things happen through *systems, timelines, and processes*.
- Leaders need to *see possibility* to not just make things happen but also let them happen on their own.

To practice personal leadership is to engage in the introspection that applies the skills of leadership to oneself. To give an example of how this approach can be valuable, meet Lori Vanderfield.

CASE STUDY: LORI VANDERFIELD

Lori, whose name has been changed here for her privacy, was buckling under the weight of the recession. The Executive Vice President of Human Resources for an investment firm, she was on the losing end of a sweeping acquisition. While she was able to keep her job as the new company took over, the stress was intense. The culture was changing. Programs she had built were being shuttered. Employees were being laid off in huge batches. As a result, this once highly engaged and committed leader was essentially shut down herself.

I had known Lori to be the kind of leader who cared deeply about her job and was committed to her own success as well as the success of her company. Not now. She was just trying to survive. I mentioned the dramatic change.

“Nobody has time for reflection,” she responded. “When you’re working nights and weekends, you get to where sleep becomes more important than self-improvement.”

While that may be true, it’s also scary. Research conducted by the Leadership Research Institute shows that the highest predictor of perceived leadership effectiveness is a commitment to self-improvement. If Lori was to add the value she was worth to the company and once again find her sense of purpose, she would need to re-engage in a whole new way.

Through a process of coaching and reflection, Lori started by reconnecting to her values. Not the values of the company that she and others had worked so hard to instill, but her values. What were the things that made her feel content? What needed to be true for Lori in order to feel a sense of peace and integrity? Reconnecting with her personal values helped Lori see that many of them were being threatened by the current environment. She was able to change her perspective and her approach to her work by putting her values back in place. As one notable example, she reprioritized her value of achievement– a step that was like putting a car in gear. Suddenly she saw the merger as an opportunity to take the lead in making the new company a success.

At this time, Lori also learned to see possibility. A woman of action, Lori was known for her masterful task lists and process efficiencies. But to succeed in a time of ambiguity, Lori needed to let go some of her systems and adopt a spirit of flexibility. She didn’t know what was ahead day to day. How could she possibly pin it down into a plan? She started opening her mind to the potential in the situation instead. How might the new company be a fresh start not just for her personally, but for the industry? What would it be like to take a perspective of trust and curiosity instead of blame and resentment? As Lori opened up to a new way of seeing her situation, she began to recognize new trends and come up with innovative new ideas. The excitement was back.

As you can see, personal leadership is an introspective process involving self-awareness, time, and thought. It requires focus and attention. But given priority, personal leadership can be transformational.

LEADING WELL AND LIVING WELL

The goal of personal leadership is to be able to live well and lead well, both at once. Kim Malone Scott, Director of Online Sales and Operations for AdSense, Doubleclick, and You Tube, is one leader who has learned to use personal leadership as an approach to life.

“The most important thing I can do to be effective as a leader is to be happy myself. In order for me to bring my full heart to my work, I learned I needed to get enough sleep and exercise, and to have conversations about ideas with friends. If I did those things, all the stress in the world couldn’t get to me.”

At a time when, as Cisco Center for Collaborative Leadership’s Annmarie Neal puts it, the stress of the times has some leaders “hiding under rocks,” we can’t overstate the importance of being able to thrive.

The times *are* tough. But leaders are tough, too. When leaders take the responsibility and the opportunity to take control of their roles and lead themselves through the challenges, they become stronger and more resilient. They are able to find the path they need in order to lead themselves through to a new reality.

THE RESULTS OF PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

Why does a leader need to practice personal leadership? What do they stand to gain from the process, and what business is it of their companies to care?

On a personal level, personal leadership improves efficiency and productivity, increases motivation, and contributes to a life of fulfillment. In his research developing a personal approach to leadership with hundreds of participants through his work at Wharton, in Fortune 50 companies and around the world, *Total Leadership* author Stewart Friedman found that participants believed their performance improved from 9 to 25% at work, at home, in their communities and within themselves. At the same time, their levels of satisfaction improved between 20 and 39%.ⁱⁱ As a way of re-engaging leaders, the work of personal leadership is essential. Stephen M.R. Covey, author of *The Speed of Trust*, agrees. “Focusing inside is not just nice-to-do work. It’s indispensable.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The success of a leader also produces better results for the business. As leaders focus on their inner edge, they become more effective on the outer edge. As leaders improve themselves, they improve their team, their organization, their company, and their results. Businesses that honor the development and well-being of their leaders experience:

Here are a few more examples:

- higher customer satisfaction,
- lower turnover,
- higher productivity,
- increased creativity,
- integrity,
- resilience,
- speed,
- quality, and
- innovation.^{iv v vi vii}

Study after study shows the importance of high-performance leadership in business. In their research, authors of *12: The Elements of Great Leadership* Wagner and Harter found that engagement alone, just one result of personal leadership, accounts for an 18% advantage in earnings-per-share for organizations over their competitors.^{viii} A study of the top twenty companies for leadership development reported in Gandossey and Efron's *Leading the Way* showed that companies that emphasize leadership development gain higher profitability long-term.^{ix} The bottom line for companies is that personal leadership is smart business.

PUTTING PERSONAL LEADERSHIP INTO PRACTICE

So how does a leader actually practice personal leadership? What do they need to do? It looks like this:

1. Take time to think. Leaders need to step out of the daily rush and think about what they're doing and why. Doing so, they will find the clarity and focus they need to get back into the action in the most effective way.
2. Look inside. Instead of being driven by the demanding urgencies, leaders can discover their inner resources – their strengths, their values, and their aspirations.
3. Rethink time and teams. The efficiencies of personal leadership come from a paradigm of abundance. Leaders need to recognize the wealth of resources available to them when they maximize their time and use the supportive people in their lives to help them achieve.

4. Work with a coach or mentor. Personal leadership is supported by a partner who can pose thoughtful questions, make observations, and help leaders learn to see new possibilities.
5. Look for ways to align and integrate one's life. We are who we are wherever we are. The closer leaders can tie their true selves to their leadership roles, and in turn their leadership roles and their lives, the happier and healthier they will be – on all fronts.

Is it easy? Not necessarily. Introspection can be hard work. Is it worth it? Ask yourself:

What would change for leaders if they had an inner resource to help them maintain stability and security within themselves when the world outside seems so unsound?

How would leaders' performance be improved if they took responsibility for their own roles and results, and if they took a deep and personal interest in their impact because it also served the interests most dear to their hearts?

How much more powerful would our company be if *all* employees at every level saw themselves as leaders and took the initiative to lead themselves?

The economic and business environment may be out of our control. Leaders' ability to thrive within this environment, on the other hand, is very much in their own hands.

David Rodriguez, Executive Vice President of Human Resources for Marriott International, summarized the current reality for leaders. "Today everyone is under a lot of pressure. There's a lot of uncertainty. A lot of emotional energy is devoted to coping with things outside our control." Without a way to restore that energy, many leaders end up feeling spent. Personal leadership gives them a way to fill themselves up with the motivation and engagement that will help them thrive again.

ⁱ Peter F. Drucker, "Managing Oneself," Harvard Business Review 77, no. 2 (1999).

ⁱⁱ Stewart D. Friedman, Total Leadership (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008), 8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal communication with Stephen M.R. Covey, February 27, 2009.

^{iv} Thomas A. Kochan, "Taking the High Road," MIT Sloan Management Review 47 no. 4 (2006).

^v Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, Now, Discover Your Strengths (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

^{vi} James M. Kouzes and Barry Posner, "A Prescription for Leading in Cynical Times," Ivey Business Journal 68, no. 6 (2004).

^{vii} Robert E. Quinn, "Moments of Greatness," Harvard Business Review 83, no. 7/8 (2005).

^{viii} Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter, 12: The Elements of Great Managing (New York: Gallup, 2006), xvi.

^{ix} Robert Gandossey and Marc Effron, Leading the Way (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004).



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