



# **Preserving Top Talent: The Leadership Circles Approach to Transforming Leaders**

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.

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*"All I do is put out fires all day long. There's no time for me to actually focus and do my work. It's all just crisis management, day after day."*

*"I'm entirely scattered. My mind is running so fast at any one time, I just fly from one activity to another trying to keep things moving, keeping them in play. I never have time to think."*

*"I get points for being a 'top performer,' but the truth is I know I'm nowhere near my best. I get results and it's exciting to see the things we're doing, but I know I'm not working at my full potential at this speed. I'm just keeping up. I'm a machine."*

These kinds of comments are becoming increasingly common among talented employees. Today's workplaces are extremely fast-paced, constantly changing, and ambiguous environments. Certainly we all have to adjust to this new reality, but in the process, talented employees are working themselves into the ground. We want them to keep the pace, but is this really the outcome we're after: that they never have time to think? That they feel like they're in crisis? That they're constantly scattered? That they feel like machines?

If company leaders hope to keep top talent, they are going to have to preserve their most talented employees. Those employees are also going to have to learn to think differently. The kind of thinking and working required in the complex work environments that have come to characterize today's business settings are more intense than they were in the past. To succeed, employees must learn to be more strategic. More thoughtful. More aligned. Leaders at every level must be approach their work with all of the talent they have, for the benefit of the company and for the sustainability of their results.

When leaders and employees discover the value of a more thoughtful approach to leadership, they experience a different day-to-day reality. They take time for the proactive, good strategic thinking that leads them to feel clearer and more settled. They are able to discern the priorities and stay focused on them, and the rest of the busyness just fades into the background. They are more focused on results.

They are better team players. They are aligned to their company vision, their managers' needs and their partners. Best of all, they have time for themselves to rest and renew their energy. Overall, they experience a more committed, results-based approach to work and life that leads to loyalty in a company, better retention, and a better quality of life.

How does one create such an environment? The secret is attending to the individual. Just as corporate leaders must apply the practices and principles of strong leadership to make their company succeed, so must individual employees apply the practices and principles of strong leadership to succeed for themselves. We call it personal leadership, and it's the heart of a high quality way to work.

### The Leadership Circles Approach the Transforming Leaders

In this article, we shine a spotlight on one program that is bringing personal leadership to a corporate environment, with results for the company and its talented employees. The program is called Leadership Circles, a year-long leadership development program that teaches the ten practices of personal leadership. Program members use the practices to achieve their vision for themselves, attain personal and professional goals, and successfully adjust their approach to their work so they can maximize their potential and truly be their best. This article describes its implementation in one of today's most successful businesses, which for the purposes of this article, we'll call NewTech. The elements of the program can be used by any organization that values and wants to keep their top talent.

#### **NewTech: A Challenging, Fast-Paced Place to Work**

When people think of NewTech, they think *big*. Its omnipresence in the technology industry and its reputation around the world make it one of the most recognizable brands.

But what's it like to work at NewTech? How do its talented employees create the company it has become today? They do it as so many successful companies do: through strong leadership, talent management, smart strategy and hard work.

That doesn't mean it's always easy. A survey of several management leaders at NewTech revealed many of the challenges common in today's world of work. To name a few, those challenges include:

1. **Pace.** The pace of change and innovation is exceptional at NewTech, a company committed to providing ever-better tools and solutions.
2. **Focus.** Add together a creative setting with inventive minds and in an industry known for speed and change, and you'll find the perfect conditions for "bright shiny object" syndrome. It's easy to be distracted.
3. **Empowerment.** Breaking free of outdated management techniques means empowering people to be independent and use their best judgment, so they can work efficiently – a change for many employees used to the old systems of command and control.

To address these challenges, leaders at NewTech needed to do several things at once: identify talented individuals in whom to invest, empower them to take a leadership mindset, teach them to focus on their top priorities, and do so in a way that would be efficient in terms of both cost and time so they could develop themselves as leaders while keeping up with the pace of their business.

For that, they turned to Leadership Circles.

#### **Personal Leadership: A Reflective Practice for Business Leaders**

The Leadership Circles Program is a leadership development program designed by the Leadership Research Institute for developing top talent. At NewTech, a customized model of the program was designed to emphasize a philosophy of Personal Leadership.

### The Leadership Circles Approach the Transforming Leaders

Personal leadership is the leadership of the self. The process involves asking yourself, “How do I need to be and act and think in order to be my best?” – a kind of self-driven style well-suited to dedicated leaders and employees who want to succeed for themselves and for the sake of their business.

Practicing personal leadership requires periodically turning away from the concerns of the day – the people, the problems, and the pressure – to explore and discover what’s truly important.

To practice personal leadership, you apply the principles of leadership that make businesses a success...to yourself. Leading in *business* involves having a compelling vision, developing strategies, and inspiring people to use their talents to meet a goal for improved business results. Leading *yourself* means applying these same principles of leadership to your role as a leader and your life. You, too, need a compelling vision and a strategy for reaching it. You need a team supporting you. You need results, as well as a sense of contribution and purpose. The difference is that personal leadership doesn’t just make for better business, it makes for better leadership. It makes for a better you.

As a leader, you must learn to lead yourself to stay effective. When you practice personal leadership, you use every ounce of your potential with inspiration instead of perspiration, synergy instead of sacrifice, and wisdom instead of work. Personal leadership is so important, in fact, that renowned management expert Peter Drucker once called it “the only leadership that’s going to matter in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

It’s also a way of helping people succeed at work. It’s a philosophy especially well-suited to high-achieving, high-performing talented leaders – those who are so committed to their own success and results that they will do almost anything to attain them. Personal Leadership offers leaders a way to sustain that high level of functioning day after day, and year after year, without sacrificing themselves.

The Leadership Circles program was designed at NewTech to give members the opportunity to focus on themselves as leaders, or in other words, to learn to lead themselves toward better results.

#### **Leadership Circles: Personal Leadership at Work**

To bring Personal Leadership to work requires providing the opportunity in some structured way. At NewTech, Leadership Circles was designed as a yearlong leadership development program in which talented employees could practice personal leadership together.

The program has several components:

- Live events
- Webinars
- Small Group Discussions
- Masterminds
- Executive Coaching.

Through this variety of approaches, members could participate from multiple, even global locations. The effect was the formation of a cohort of leader-minded employees who could successfully adapt to the pace, culture and expectations at NewTech while preserving a sense of personal and professional well-being.

### *A Vision and Goals*

The Leadership Circles Program begins with a vision. Unlike many programs that impose a vision *on* participants, Leadership Circles elicits the vision *from* them. Program members develop a clear, specific, holistic vision that helps them align to the things that are most important to them in their lives and at work.

In addition, program members define goals related to their vision that they can work on over the course of the year. Their goals may incorporate business and performance objectives (sales goals, departmental goals, team goals), and they may also cover other areas of their lives (career goals, health and wellness goals, personal goals).

### *The Ten Practices*

Program members learn ten practices of personal leadership and apply them toward their vision and goals to gain impactful results.

The ten practices are based on the book *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*.

- 1. Get Clarity.** Clarity comes from asking the question, What do you want? When you have clarity about what you're trying to achieve, the noise created by competing priorities quiets down.
- 2. Find Focus.** Focus is about understanding where to put your attention. Focusing has become a precious skill in a world where people feel more and more fractured. Being able to focus means you not only know your vision and goals, you actually prioritize them.
- 3. Take Action.** High-achieving individuals know how to take action. In some cases, they are doing, doing, doing so much at every moment, they barely have time to think. By moving the action *after* a clear sense of vision and *after* focusing on priorities, action becomes much more targeted.
- 4. Tap Into Your Brilliance.** The ability to tap into your brilliance is about knowing what's unique about you, and being able to leverage it so you bring your best strengths and talents to bear on your efforts to get the best results.
- 5. Feel Fulfillment.** What motivates you and makes you happy? When you know your values and have integrated them into your approach to work and life, you disconnect from the frenetic pace so common in today's workplace and find a satisfying sense of peace.
- 6. Maximize Your Time.** Make no mistake: talented high-achievers want to make the most of every moment. This practice asks the question, How can you achieve more with less? By learning to maximize your time, you can succeed without the stress.

**7. Build Your Team.** Most employees, even individual contributors, have a team at work, but the truly effective build up a team for themselves. Who can support you? Mentors, sponsors, coaches, managers, friends, and advocates all shore you up so you don't have to shoulder everything it takes to succeed by yourself.

**8. Keep Learning.** What do you most need to know? Personal leadership values ongoing learning as an essential element to high achievement.

**9. See Possibility.** Perhaps the least concrete of the practices, the ability to see possibility is a shift in one's world view and beliefs. As counterintuitive as it may seem, you may actually be more successful if you can stop trying so hard to make things happen and learn to let things happen on their own.

**10. All...All at Once.** The last practice of personal leadership brings all of the rest of the practices into alignment and integration. This practice is the secret to virtually having it all – and moving from excellent to extraordinary.

Together, the ten practices walk program members down a path to their vision and goals, More importantly, they provide a process one can use over and over again as they continuously revise their vision and goals on the lifelong path of high achievement.

#### *Concrete, Measureable Results*

In the Leadership Circles Program, success isn't measured just by learning the practices of personal leadership. It's measured by success on each member's vision and goals.

We call them concrete, measurable results – the kind of results that actually drive a business forward.

Sometimes those results are deliverables for members' work goals. Perhaps they include an increase in employee engagement scores, an improvement in customer satisfaction, or better productivity for a team.

Sometimes those results are career-related. They might include a promotion, a new opportunity, or a special assignment.

Sometimes those results are personal. Examples include better work/life balance, higher quality relationships, and better health.

Most likely, members' results include all three. When you practice personal leadership at work and in your life, you gain positive results in every area of your goals. In short, you reach your vision for success plus quality of life.

#### **Preserving Top Talent: Leadership Circles at NewTech**

By establishing a personal vision and goals and then applying the ten practices of personal leadership to achieve concrete, measurable results, Leadership Circles program members at NewTech achieved a variety of impressive outcomes.

Before assessing results, consider the original intent. When NewTech managers nominated their top talent to participate in the program, they talked about what they wanted them to learn. They wanted their employees to see themselves as leaders who added value to the company. They wanted them to prioritize the most important tasks and leverage their teams to achieve big goals. They wanted them to deal with change effectively, to be more introspective, calm and balanced, and to work strategically.

By the end of their Leadership Circles program, that's exactly what they did.

"I am certainly thinking more about what I am doing," said one member.

Another reported, "I am paying more attention to the development of others on my team. I am more effective."

Another member said, "I am setting clear career goals and constantly returning to them" month after month.

One member described himself as having "effectively stopped the 'randomization' of myself. I am planning now. Planning for success. Planning for execution. Planning for activities."

One by one, the members of Leadership Circles were able to report their concrete measurable results. To share just one example:

*"In one year, I have successfully realigned the program management team for the Americas to be more disciplined and strategic in our approach, enabling the team to provide better readiness support for both our internal and external partners, and increased the condition of satisfaction for our team by over 20 points. My Leadership Circles Mastermind group enabled me to more effectively integrate into a new professional culture which contributed to my successful first year in my role."*

–Manager, NewTech

#### **Closing Thoughts**

While NewTech's Leadership Circles members ended their program feeling clearer, more thoughtful and better prepared to rise to the constant challenges of the business world, we are aware that talented employees in many organizations are at risk. We hope that by building personal leadership into leadership development programs like Leadership Circles, many more leaders will be able to approach their work with a sustainable sense of self and satisfaction. Then rather than feeling scattered and burned out, they will be able to contribute their full potential to their organizations, with benefits for themselves at work and in life.

Then we will hear more leaders talking about the successes at work instead of the challenges.

## Preserving Top Talent:

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*"I love my work. It's a good feeling to know that every day I bring my strengths to my role. By doing what I do best, I am able to help my team deliver on the projects and initiatives that make a difference to the company, and at the same time, I feel invigorated and inspired. It's an exciting time to be in business, where there is so much change and possibility. I'm grateful that I can be a part of it – using my talents, getting results and enjoying myself along the way."*

#### **About the Author**

Joelle K. Jay, Ph. D. is a Principal at Leadership Research Institute (LRI) specializing in leadership development for senior executives in Fortune 500 companies, like Google, MetLife, and Adobe. She is an executive coach, keynote speaker, and the author of *The Inner Edge: The Ten Practices of Personal Leadership*. She strategizes with business leaders to enhance their performance and maximize business results...while preserving the quality of life that keeps them at their best.