

JOELLE K JAY

LEADERSHIP AS A WAY OF LIFE: THE 10 PRACTICES OF PERSONAL LEADERSHIP

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All around us, a few exceptional individuals and teams are accomplishing the seemingly impossible... They're hitting higher-than-expected targets and making it look easy, doing it with more ingenuity and fewer resources, more speed and less stress, more trust and less time – while still managing to have rich and full lives.ⁱ

Robert Cooper, *Get Out of Your Own Way*

In the past few years, businesses have been hit hard with a talent crunch, a generational shift, and an economic downturn, and that's all on top of the usual 21st century challenges of globalization, innovation, and technology. How can leaders possibly keep up? They must, and they will. But in order to do so successfully, they must learn to not only lead their organizations but also lead themselves. They must learn to practice personal leadership.

THE INNER EDGE (WHAT IS PERSONAL LEADERSHIP?)

Personal leadership is the leadership of the self. It is the ability to define a direction for your life and leadership, and to move in that direction with consistency and clarity over time. In a positive, unselfish way, personal leadership means putting yourself first. Literally speaking, personal means “about you;” leadership means “coming first.” When you practice personal leadership, you “lead from the ‘inside out.’” 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 who will carry business into the future.

To practice personal leadership, you apply the principles of leadership that make businesses a success...to yourself. For example, 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 in 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.

There are ten practices, specifically, that will help you be a better leader and lead a better life.

1. GET CLARITY. (WHAT DO YOU WANT?)

Getting clarity means being able to connect clearly and instantly to your long- and short-term ideas about success.

In business, this practice often equates to setting a company vision. While a vision is a powerful thing, it's not quite what you need as a leader. You may have a personal vision for yourself, but in addition, you need the skill of getting clarity on that vision again and again over time. Your vision will change as you change. Getting clarity ensures you don't make changes in a direction you don't want to go.

In his 2006 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Five Messages Leaders Must Manage," CEO advisor John Hamm summarizes the results of this practice. "When a leader defines what he or she really means and sets a clear direction according to that definition, relationships and feedback improve, action is more efficient and on-strategy, and improved performance follows."ⁱⁱ

It should be noted that having a clear and stated vision isn't always easy, especially for an individual leader whose life is evolving all the time. It's not as important to pin down the details as it is to get a clear sense of the overall direction. Patrick Byrne, the CEO of Overstock.com, has ridden his bike three times from California to New York. As he describes it, "Bicycling, I used to think about the Atlantic ocean. I thought, as long as I'm pointed east and I'm still pedaling, I have to be getting closer." When leaders have clarity about what they want, even if they don't know exactly how to get there, they will be getting closer to their ultimate vision in every step.

2. FIND FOCUS. (WHERE WILL YOU PUT YOUR ATTENTION?)

When you find focus, you fix your attention on top priorities even when the world around you is pulling you away.

In business, focus shows up in the form of a strategic plan. The strategic plan makes it possible for everyone in an organization to see in a single document the vision, mission, goals, strategies and so on of an organization so they can all stay on the same page. As a leader, you also need a one-pager to remind you of your priorities – maybe not down an exhaustive list of tactics, but at least the short list of areas that matter most to you.

Having such focus is crucial especially in challenging times. Reflecting on the impact of the recession on leaders, Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer Randy Brown of WellPoint emphasizes the risk of not knowing your priorities.

“It sounds so easy and obvious, but when day to day realities punch you in the face, you have to be grounded and centered. You have to remind yourself what your priorities are. If you’re not anchored well you can be thrown around in the wind.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Management expert Robert Kaplan suggests that leaders keep their list focus areas short, reminding us, “Having 15 priorities is the same as not having any at all.” The idea is to get your one or two top priorities clearly in mind so you know where to put your attention.

3. TAKE EFFECTIVE ACTION. (WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO NOW?)

Have you ever spent a whole day busy at work, only to end it wondering if you actually got anything done? You can stop spinning your wheels and start driving with direction, quickly, easily, and with time to spare.

Action items are the language of productivity in organizations, but as a leader you need more than a task list. You need to practice the mindsets and approaches to decision-making that help you take only the most effective actions and leave the rest behind.

In his research for the book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins found this kind of results-oriented commitment to action to be one of the hallmarks of leadership in successful organizations. Having witnessed the “the quiet, dogged nature” of effective leaders, he concludes, “Disciplined action without disciplined thought is a recipe for disaster.”

4. TAP INTO YOUR BRILLIANCE. (WHAT’S UNIQUE ABOUT YOU?)

To tap into your brilliance is to identify what’s exceptional about you, both positive and negative, and use your uniqueness to your advantage.

In an effort to grow human capital, organizational leaders are constantly trying to attract and retain talent. When you tap into your brilliance, you make the most of the talents you already have.

This practice captures the spirit of what author and former Gallup researcher Marcus Buckingham (*Now, Discover Your Strengths and Go, Put Your Strengths to Work*) calls “a strengths approach” to leadership. The philosophy is that we are at our best when we are aligned with our strengths.

Based on Gallup’s 40 year study of human strengths as described in Tom Rath’s *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, “People who have the opportunity to focus on their strengths every day are six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and more than three times as likely to report having an excellent quality of life in general.”^{vi} As a leader, you need to know what those strengths are, and then leverage them to the best possible advantage.

5. FEEL FULFILLMENT. (WHAT MOTIVATES YOU AND MAKES YOU HAPPY?)

In order to be your most effective as a leader, you get to discover what drives you - your values, meaning and purpose – so that you feel fulfilled. “Fulfillment” may not sound like a critical business result, but it is an essential requirement for great leaders.

In *The Eighth Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, Stephen Covey writes, “Deep within each one of us there is an inner longing to live a life of greatness and contribution – to really matter, to really make a difference.”^{vii} Bolman and Deal, authors of *Leading with Soul*, agree: “Each of us has a special contribution to make if we can shoulder the personal and spiritual work needed to discover and take responsibility for our own gifts.”^{viii} When you know what fulfills you, you are able to give of your gifts in a way that also gives back to you.

The benefits of fulfillment are not purely personal. It’s not just about feeling good. Engagement alone, just one aspect of fulfillment, accounts for an 18 percent advantage in earnings-per-share for organizations over their competitors.^{ix} Fulfillment is also the underlying motivator for commitment, loyalty, and drive.

Fulfillment is the part of work that nurtures the soul and enlivens the spirit. Unless you find personal meaning in what you do with your life and have a way to make a contribution in line with your values, the work is reduced to just that: work.

6. MAXIMIZE YOUR TIME. (HOW CAN YOU ACHIEVE MORE WITH LESS?)

Maximizing your time – as opposed to simply managing it – means to think differently about time and learn to do more with less.

Businesses have tried to promote this concept by encouraging time management. But the years go by and the problem only seems to get worse. We’re just getting busier, with abysmal results.

Almost 2500 years ago, Socrates warned, “Beware the barrenness of a busy life.” Clearly we haven’t gotten the message. From multi-tasking to mismanaged time, we are constantly trying to cram more and more into our days and getting less and less in return. The idea that the stress is somehow “worth it” is a lie. “Lives in the Balance” author Diane Fassel sums it up like this:

Many myths underlie our fascination with workaholism... The first myth is that workaholics are more productive and therefore profitable to organizations. Repeatedly, this myth has proven to be wrong... The second myth states that no one ever died of hard work.^x

The Japanese even have a name for it: *karoshi*, or sudden death by overwork.

If you can learn to maximize your time, say by focusing for twenty or thirty minutes straight on one task or learning to engage in resting mindfulness, you can increase your problem-solving time by up to 500 %.^{xi xii}

7. BUILD YOUR TEAM. (WHO CAN SUPPORT YOU?)

When you build your team, you develop your own private team of supporters – not just fans, but advocates who will help you succeed.

In business, when we talk about “teams” we usually think about the people who work with us – our bosses, our direct reports, or our peers. As a leader you need a different kind of team – one that is designed specifically to support you, personally and professionally, on the way to your goals.

In *Authentic Leadership*, Bill George writes eloquently about the importance of a personal support team.

Leaders cannot succeed on their own; even the most outwardly confident executives need support and advice. Without strong relationships to provide perspective, it is very easy to lose your way. Authentic leaders build extraordinary support teams to help them stay on course. Those teams counsel them in times of uncertainty, help them in times of difficulty, and celebrate with them in times of success. After their hardest days, leaders find comfort in being with people on whom they can rely.^{xiii}

They say it’s lonely at the top. It doesn’t have to be if you build a team around you for support.

8. KEEP LEARNING. (WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?)

True leaders keep adapting and improving in this world of unending change. They keep learning.

Many leaders believe that they do. Ask them how they continue to learn and grow, and they’ll tell you, “I’m learning all the time.” But it’s a passive kind of learning that just happens along the way. While that may be common, it’s not very strategic. Leaders need to think about the learning that’s available to them and leverage it so they can sharpen their competitive edge.

Note that the emphasis in this practice is on the *learning*, not the *knowing*. Stuart Crabb, who leads human resources at Facebook, makes this distinction.

“The *knower* attitude is self-assured. The belief of knowers is that they don’t need to learn, and they speak more than they listen. The *learner* is more humble, open, and receptive to new ideas.”^{xiv}

For all leaders, learning must be a fluid process that allows them to respond to innovations and embrace new ideas as they emerge in a constantly changing world. Jack Welch puts it bluntly. “Good leaders are, by definition, voracious learners.”^{xv} If you want to reach that peak performance, you need to lead your own learning.

9. SEE POSSIBILITY. (HOW CAN YOU INVITE SUCCESS TO YOU?)

By learning to see possibility, you will take advantage of the hidden opportunities all around you – the ones most people miss.

In business, possibility often takes the form of innovation. In personal leadership, possibility is less about creation and more about allowing. It's extending the intention and invitation to the opportunities around you and being available when they show up.

Author Shakti Gawain (*Creating True Prosperity*) makes a distinction between *making it happen* – the aggressive, analytical, typically Western approach to action – and *letting it happen* – the intuitive, creative approach often associated with Eastern philosophy.^{xvi} If you can learn to balance both ways of being in your approach to seeing possibility, you can stop chasing success and invite success to you. As Daniel Pink once put it, you can “learn to make your own luck.”^{xvii}

10. ALL...ALL AT ONCE. (HOW DO YOU MOVE FROM EXCELLENT TO EXTRAORDINARY?)

“All...all at once” is a reminder that you don't have to sacrifice some parts of your life to succeed in others. You can align and integrate your activities so you can enjoy and excel in every moment of being a leader and leading your life.

In an article called “How Successful Leaders Think,”^{xviii} Roger Martin, the dean of the Rotterman School of Management at the University of Toronto, calls this “integrative thinking,” a habit he calls the “mark of an exceptional leader.” It means being able to synthesize opposing ideas in your mind to come up an idea that is new and superior. The ideas you integrate may be business solutions, political opinions, or the different elements of your complex and multi-faceted life. When you practice integrative thinking, you discover what author and educator Parker Palmer calls your “hidden wholeness.”^{xix}

For some reason we have found it necessary in business to separate the personal and the professional sides of ourselves. To lead and live well is to integrate the various aspects of our lives into one harmonious whole.

LEADING ON THE EDGE (WHAT KIND OF A GIFT DO YOU WANT TO BE?)

At first blush, personal leadership may seem self-serving. After all, aren't we supposed to be serving the organization? Isn't our role to lead everyone else?

Well, yes and no. Certainly the most emphasized aspects of leadership tend to be external – as in leading a company, leading an project, or leading a team. But personal leadership is another aspect to leadership that is equally important. Again, it's about leading the self, which is the source of a leader's success.

Just look at the effects of neglecting the leader behind the work. Employee depletion, disengagement, and attrition cost the business world dearly. As Gallup researchers Rath and Clifton report,

This rampant negativity is not only disheartening, it's expensive: It costs the U.S. economy between \$250 and \$300 billion every year in lost productivity alone. When you add workplace injury, illness, turnover, absences, and fraud, the cost could surpass \$1 trillion per year, or nearly 10% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These costs are not specific to the United States; they exist to varying degrees in every country, industry, and organization we have studied.^{xx}

As reported by the American Society for Training and Development, "The cost of replacing a senior executive averages about five times his or her annual salary"^{xxi} For economic reasons alone, organizations have a vested interest in encouraging the aspects of leadership that sustain and support the leaders themselves.

Of course, that's only part of the picture. Personal leadership doesn't just save companies money. It taps into that part of the human soul that longs to add meaning to life. As Stephen Covey writes in *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, "Deep within each one of us there is an inner longing to live a life of greatness and contribution – to really matter, to really make a difference."^{xxii}

As a leader you have many gifts to offer, and the real gift you have to give is yourself. What kind of a gift do you want to be?

By practicing personal leadership, you will discover what's truly possible for yourself as a

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ⁱRobert Cooper, *Get out of Your Own Way* (New York: Crown Business, 2006), 10.

ⁱⁱJohn Hamm, "The Five Messages Leaders Must Manage," *Harvard Business Review* 84, no. 5 (2006): 116.

ⁱⁱⁱPersonal communication with Randy Brown, June 10, 2009.

^{iv}Robert S. Kaplan, "What to Ask the Person in the Mirror," *Harvard Business Review* 85, no. 1 (2007): 88.

^vJim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 126.

^{vi}Tom Rath, *Strengthsfinder2.0* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), iii.

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Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D., is president of the leadership development practice, Pillar Consulting. As an executive coach, author and speaker, Joelle helps leaders achieve top performance and business results. Her clients include presidents, vice presidents, and C-level executives in Fortune 500 companies. Joelle is the author of *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*. To find out how Joelle can help you reach the next level, visit: www.TheInnerEdge.com.