



Why would anyone want to be led by you?

Summer 2011



By Trever Cartwright, Partner

The year is half over. Many leaders and executive teams are taking their annual step back to do a deep-dive assessment of their organization's progress against the goals and objectives of their strategic plans.

As part of your mid-year strategic progress review, consider including another area of assessment—one that will require a different kind of evaluation and be much more introspective in nature. Why not take some time to also consider how you're progressing as a leader? After all, an organization's strategic performance is, in large part, a direct reflection of the effectiveness of the person—or the team—at the top.

When it comes to leadership are you a finished product?

If you're reading this article, chances are you're in a leadership position. Maybe you're a CEO. Maybe you're a vice president or perhaps a director of a department. Regardless, if you're like most professionals in leadership roles, you likely believe you're a good leader—or at least, *good enough*. But the truth is, if you're brutally honest with yourself—you may not know for sure. You hope you are. End of story, right?

Sure—for many leaders, that is the end of the story. And yet the optimist in me says that for many more, their sense of humility tells them that being an even better leader tomorrow than they are today is possible. And this possibility is actually inspiring and important to pursue. As long as they believe this possibility exists, they keep striving.

Which camp do you fall in?

When it comes to leadership, are you a finished product? Are you as good as it gets? Or do you believe that leadership is more of a practice—something that resembles more of an art form that, over time, you hone and aspire to perfect?

Let me pose just one more question and ask you to sit with it for a few days before you leap to an answer. It's a question that I believe is worthy of any leader's full attention and the time it takes to actually appreciate its gravity: Why would anyone want to be led by you?

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Recently, Coraggio posed this question in a Harvard Business Review on-line survey that was taken by leaders around the world. The responses revealed an interesting mix of perspectives. Here are a few that we received:

- “Because I’m above average height.”
- “Because I’m willing to wash the feet of my followers.”
- “Because I can provide enough confidence for myself.”
- “Because they just do. I can’t explain it.”
- “Because my values are clear.”
- “Because I’ll bring out the best in them.”
- “Because I’m credible.”

We knew we hit a nerve with this question. What we found as we reviewed the responses was something very important to consider: Is it possible that many leaders honestly don't know why anyone would want to be led by them?

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If you were to Google “leadership” you'd likely find nearly 200,000,000 entries. Suffice to say, there are a lot of opinions on the topic. Mine is just one more to add to the heap. I think you'll agree, though, that it's a topic worthy of

lengthy contemplation, especially given the role you fill within your company. And, what's more, many would argue that when it comes to organizational performance, the difference between ordinary and extraordinary is excellence in leadership. So the stakes are certainly high.

You're never too old and you'll never occupy a position too high to admire someone else for their leadership ability.

If getting clear on why anyone would want to be led by you resonates and you think that it's important for you to be able answer the question, consider the following thought-provoking perspectives that will help you focus and, hopefully, take the edge off the tension that our question often causes.

Truth #1: Leadership cannot be mastered.

Cut yourself some slack. Leadership is not a pass/fail proposition. Leadership is and always will be an aspiration—a concept of positive influence that has at its deepest roots your genuine desire to strive to be a better leader today than you were yesterday. The moment you believe you're a finished product and there is just no more room for improvement on your behalf, you have crossed the thin, but very bright line that separates confidence from arrogance.

Truth #2: Leadership stands for something.

What do you stand for? If people don't know what you stand for, they will not follow you. Instead they will be going through the mental gymnastics of trying to figure out who you are. In the eyes of your employees, the truest measure of what you stand for will always be their observation—and subsequent assessment—of the link between your actions and your behaviors. When your actions and behaviors are in alignment, the result is always integrity.

Truth #3: Leadership has its roots in a genuine belief in others.

If you're willing to believe in your people—to actually see in them more than they can see in

themselves—they will reward you with their loyalty, their dedication and their followership. This means you have to take an active and genuine interest in them. If people believe you have lost faith in them, that you don't respect them or you don't appreciate them, they will not follow you. They will only comply with you. And compliance never lasts long. Think about it. Have you ever been willing to follow a leader who didn't believe in you?

Truth #4: Leadership isn't about you.

I know—it sounds a little counter-intuitive. But, I've never met a leader—a great leader—who didn't admire someone else's leadership and strive to model aspects of their own style, principles and approach in the image of that person. Regardless of your level of leadership, whether you're a CEO or the director of a department, be willing to admire someone else. Make him or her your mentor or role model, even if he or she doesn't know they play one of those roles for you. The point is, aspirational leadership is bigger than you. You will become the great leader you aspire to be only when you have a

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clear understanding of a lousy leader. Open your eyes and find a role model. Observe other leaders in action. You're never too old and you'll never occupy a position too high to admire someone else for their leadership ability.

Truth #5: Leadership is about doing less of what lessens you.

Less truly is more when it comes to great leadership. The most effective leaders with whom I've worked are the ones who know their limits and aren't afraid to simply say, "I don't know." or, "That's just not my strength." Further, aspiring to be a great leader means you're consciously investing more in what strengthens you and less in what lessens you. When you feel at the top of your game as a leader, what typically has led you to that sense of accomplishment? Have you just read

a great book? Have you listened rather than spewed? Whatever your answer—get clear and then do more of what makes you feel effective.

Truth #6: Leadership is about bilateral influence.

Influence is a two-way street: You influence your people. And you're comfortable with them influencing you. How else would you know if they're learning and growing as young leaders if you're doing all the influencing? Leaders influence those who are inspired to follow them by helping them to learn and grow as individuals, to help them expand their capacity for critical thinking and, ultimately, to realize their innate strengths and talents. For example, taking control from your people by not letting them make decisions will only douse their sense of influence and initiative. Instead, consider that you can increase your influence, and, thus, their competence and confidence, by letting others influence you. In the book *The Leadership Challenge*, authors Kouzes and Posner share their perspective that people who feel capable of influencing their leaders are more strongly attached to those leaders and more committed to effectively carrying out their responsibilities. I've found this to be true in my work with organizations. I've also found that a leader who is willing to be influenced is able to learn a great deal more about their direct report's capacity for leadership.

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These six truths haven't failed me in my coaching work with leaders inside their organizations. And they haven't failed me in my personal aspiration to become a great leader—a never ending quest to be sure.

The prevailing challenge I find in my consulting work is helping clients to be consistently mindful of the tangible link between strategic success and leadership

effectiveness. The two simply go hand and glove. Intellectually, we get that leadership is a critical factor in any organization's performance. And yet we often dismiss it as the soft stuff or the ethereal with no practical or tactical application.

As part of your mid-year progress review, make it a point to integrate a focused evaluation of how you and your executive team are performing as the leaders of your organization.

Here's the agenda item for your next executive team meeting:

- I. Why would anyone want to be led by you?

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