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Leadership: Finding Clarity

by: Trever Cartwright

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We chase after leadership as though it were the business equivalent of the Holy Grail. We search for its coveted code in the countless books and articles we read and re-read, we make the annual pilgrimage to leadership conferences in strange cities far from home and still we wonder at the end of each day as we drive home to our families, “Am I a good leader?”

The available information is astounding! All one needs to do is Google the word “leadership” and literally millions upon millions of entries can be found on the subject — 179 million as of this writing. In 2004 2,000 books were published on the subject of leadership, each one with its own angle on the truth about leadership. Suffice to say with so much information readily available our study of the subject is not unlike drinking water from a fire hose. Overwhelming would be an understatement.

Because of so much information, it is difficult by any measure to achieve a clear picture of what great leadership really is. Yet we keep reading, we keep comparing, we keep aspiring.

Our recommendation: relax. There is no Holy Grail — no “one-size-fits-all.” No one answer. There is only you, your point of view and your courage to stand for your values, your beliefs and the experience you aspire to create for others.

In our work with leaders at all levels, we have discovered that leadership is in fact an entirely personal journey that has along its winding path a plethora of surprises and a priceless handful of epiphanies. Often when these surprises and epiphanies reveal themselves the experience is visceral. In these moments, our perspective on leadership is forever altered. Our way of relating to others, particularly those we lead, comes from a place of clarity, focus and confidence.

Our Natural Resources

We view leadership as a conscious developmental process. We develop levels of leadership competence

over time, therefore the leader we are today is likely more adept than the leader we were 10 years ago. If only leadership were a gene we inherited at birth! Alas, it is not.

We are, however, born with certain natural resources or signature talents that lend themselves, more so than others, to becoming more adept in certain dimensions of leadership. Not unlike a muscle, our natural resources or talents must be consistently exercised in order to develop and build strength. Many of us make the conscious choice to go to the gym each day in order to keep our muscles toned, agile, healthy and responsive. When we make the conscious choice not to go to the gym each day, we’re effectively making the choice to allow our muscle tone to drift into atrophy. The development of our leadership talent is no different.

When we stop exercising our signature talents that most lend themselves to leadership, our effectiveness as a leader will diminish, our confidence will wane and so too will our credibility with others. Aspiring to become a great leader puts us on a journey with no known destination. The journey requires consistent practice and repetition. Not unlike an athlete, a great leader must devote him or herself to a lifetime of realizing his or her potential.

Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence and co-author of [Primal Leadership](#), says, “Although people may differ in the initial level of their natural abilities, everyone can learn to improve, no matter where he or she starts out.” Herein lies our potential as a leader.

In order to grow as leaders, we must take careful inventory of where we are in relation to where we desire to be. For the aspirational leader, there will always be a gap between the two. Understanding the gap is a critical factor to continuous improvement. As they say in London, “Mind the gap.”

The Gift of Clarity

A familiar refrain in business lore is: “If you don’t know

where you're going, any road will take you there.” This is how many leaders have arrived at their leadership philosophy and approach — by accident rather than with intention. Great leaders become great on purpose. They leave nothing to accident or luck. They also don't rest on the merits of their intellect. Few people will comment on intelligence when describing inspiring leadership.

According to Ken Curchin, VP of Sales US Geographies for Heinz North America: “I am most surprised at how little leadership experience many executives have. They got to their position by being smart, being a manager or micromanager or by being in the right place at the right time. Unfortunately executive pressures and the real needs of the organization often leave them ill-equipped to lead in their current role. Ultimately they fail and are asked to leave.”

We find that clarity, rather than intellect, is what effective leaders rely on most — specifically the clarity of who they are, what they stand for and how they want to influence. In our work helping leaders achieve clarity we have found that true clarity can only be gained when there is context for clarity to emerge — in this case the clear aspiration of the kind of leader we desire to become within the context of what the organization needs most.

Albert Einstein framed it perfectly, “We must be careful not to make intellect our God. It has powerful muscles, of course, but it has no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve.”



Figure 1

Coraggio's Clarity Questions for Leaders

The following questions will help to kick start the clarity cycle:

1. Why would anyone want to be led by me?
2. Why wouldn't anyone want to be led by me?
3. What experience do I want to create for those I lead?
4. What do I believe about people?
5. What do I believe about leadership?
6. What will be my leadership legacy?

Figure 2

The Grounding Effect of a Leadership Platform

A byproduct of leadership clarity is a compelling point of view that guides the way in which we lead and influence. In turn, this point of view informs our leadership platform — the foundation upon which we stand that gives us confidence and conviction in our roles and the ability to make decisions knowing we always have our personal values and integrity within reach. Without such a platform we have no way to ground ourselves or to assess our progress as we move toward our leadership aspiration.

Joe Jones, head coach for Columbia University's men's basketball team aptly frames the value of having a leadership platform: “The most surprising thing in my career that I have seen is the success of people who are not great leaders. Our profession can be so up and down and it can be easy to chase ‘the easy way out’ by sacrificing ethics and personal philosophy in order to win. I have found that in the long run it is far more worth it to challenge yourself to do things the right way and not cut corners.”

We cut corners when we have no platform to inform our actions and behaviors. We'll do just about anything because we have no boundaries. Wandering aimlessly without the grounding and clarity that a solid platform provides ultimately leads to our personal disillusion or, equally disruptive, our public dismissal.

Our values, beliefs and the experience we want others to have of us complete the leader's platform composite. In the figure on page 3, I have placed example responses that correspond to each category

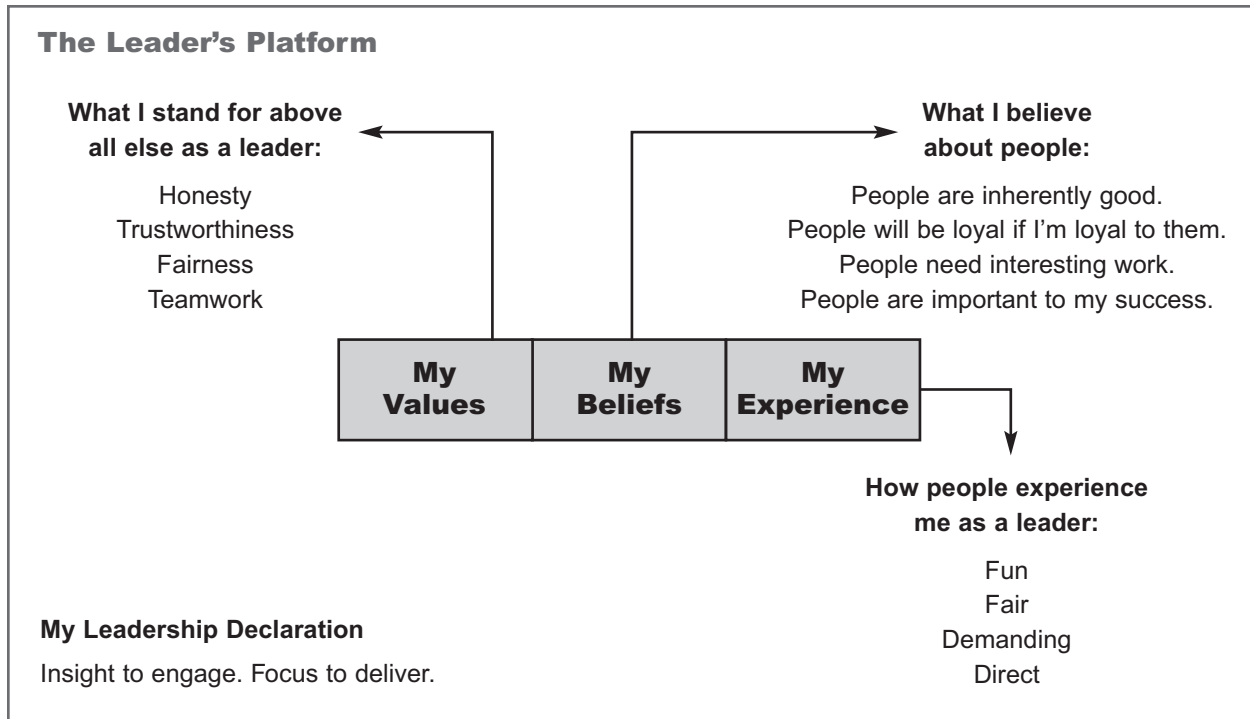


Figure 3

heading. Each aspect of the composite is inextricably related to the other. The leadership declaration is the internal statement we make to ourselves that quickly snaps us into focus and is closely associated with our values and beliefs.

Our Values

Employees expect leaders to assert themselves on matters such as values and character. It follows, then, that the leader has taken time to assess his or her values and exactly what “character” means. Leaders who aren’t clear on their values are likely to drift in whatever direction the wind blows, appeasing others in order to be liked rather than respected.

Your values are *your* values — they are what you stand for not what someone else thinks you should stand for. We often “ought” ourselves into being more like someone else, many times at the insistence of someone whom we respect or admire — or simply desire to be like.

Charles Handy, author of [The Hungry Spirit: Beyond Capitalism, A Quest for Purpose in the Modern World](#) describes the difficulty of connecting with his own values:

I spent the early part of my life trying hard to be someone else. At school I wanted to be a great athlete, at university an admired socialite, afterwards a businessman and, later, the head of a great institution. It did not take long to discover that I was not destined to be successful in any of these guises, but that did not prevent me from trying, and being perpetually disappointed with myself.

The problem was that in trying to be someone else, I neglected to concentrate on the person I could be. That idea was too frightening to contemplate at the time, measuring success in terms of money and position, climbing ladders which others placed in my way, collecting things and contacts rather than giving expression to my own beliefs and personality.

When we take time to reflect on the values that most define us, we are less likely to fall into the “ought” trap. Instead, we relate to others in a way that is natural, truly authentic and always consistent.

Leadership that stems from a deeply rooted values base informs us on how we interact with others — how we respond or react to stressful situations. So too do our values inform others on what to expect from us as leaders. There should be no doubt in the minds of those

we lead what we stand for and what we believe in. It's true: We won't believe the messenger if we don't know what the messenger believes in.

When our actions and behaviors are in alignment the result is always integrity. Having clarity on our values helps keep our integrity intact.

Our Beliefs

Great leadership is no accident. It is the result of thoughtful introspection done regularly. Great leaders constantly ask themselves tough questions. The answers that surface are not always readily apparent. Sometimes the answers are obvious. Sometimes they take time to reveal themselves.

When was the last time you asked yourself, "What do I believe in above all else?" Without taking some amount of time to reflect on this, it's difficult to imagine being a person of compelling influence. In our work with leaders, the clarity that comes from having answered this question is truly transformational. We often hear answers such as, God. Fairness. Teamwork. Myself. My intelligence.

The next question which is equally rigorous is: "Based on this belief (or this collection of beliefs), how, specifically, have I demonstrated *"fairness"* in the last week?" This is the clincher. Where is the evidence?

We can say we believe in this or we believe in that. Yet if there is no evidence to support the belief, then we need to ask ourselves the question again, "What do I believe in above all else?" The message here is simple and straight forward. Prove it! If we can't back it up, we are nothing more than an empty threat.

Our beliefs sponsor our behavior. If we believe that people are valuable and important, then we will treat them with honor and respect. If, on the other hand, we believe that people are inherently stupid and incapable, then we will treat them with disdain. If we believe in our company's vision — that the work of our company is important in the world, we will communicate this belief through our actions, our behaviors and our interactions — and people will follow us.

Our Experience

In this context we're not referring to our background or our resume. In every interaction with others, we have a conscious decision to make. What experience do I want to create for this person? What do I want people to say when I leave the room? In fact where leadership is concerned, it does matter what people think of us.

Great leaders breathe life into others. They create more energy in the room than they consume. No one would choose to be around what we call an "energy suck." These are the people whose presence literally sucks all the energy, momentum and enthusiasm out of people leaving them demoralized, defeated and exhausted.

We have found that the most effective leaders are those who understand the value and the importance of believing that leadership is a tribute. Framing leadership as a tribute is a way to conceptualize the kind of leader we want to be known or remembered as.

John Demopolous, a former regional manager for National City Bank framed the leadership as a tribute concept well: "Someone recently asked me who the most influential leader was I have ever had the opportunity to work with over the course of my career. After thinking about it for several minutes, I shared the story of my first boss who, 20 years ago, believed in me more than I believed in myself. She saw talent in me that I didn't even know I had. I'll always be grateful for that experience. It really shaped who I am today as a leader."

Are you the kind of leader who, 20 years from now, will be described as someone who had a positive influence on the people you're leading today? Doing what it takes to create an overall experience for people that is worthy of tribute goes far in earning the kind of dedication and commitment from employees that makes a company's culture operate at its optimum.

Great leadership is the result of a strong, evolving personal point of view that encapsulates our experiences, our insights and our good intentions. It is based on a deeply held sense of values and beliefs and a desire to invest our time and energy in the success of others. It all starts with recognizing that there's no better way to lead than to do so in a way that authentically reflects the true and clear picture of who we really are.

About Coraggio Institute

Coraggio Institute is where we organize our thinking and the way we approach our work. Here we collect our thoughts, ideas, experiences, research and writings. We call it our think tank — a self-perpetuating well of knowledge and insight that informs all that we do as consultants as well as the method by which we design and deliver our learning and development programs. For more information about Coraggio Institute or Coraggio Group, visit coraggiogroup.com or call 503-493-1453.