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Big Leaps & Baby Steps

By Anthony D. Paustian, Ph.D.

“If you start to take Vienna—then take Vienna.”

- Napoleon

It’s the Thought That Counts

I was once asked to teach a college capstone marketing class for two semesters while a professor was on sabbatical. The students were fourth-year marketing majors, and the purpose of the class was to bring their marketing education together into a holistic, strategic context.

To provide them with “real world” marketing experience, I arranged to collaborate with a local business that manufactured and sold a high-end product line. The owner of the business agreed to let teams of five students each develop strategic marketing plans and create promotional campaigns for his business (which was especially appropriate since college-aged students are one of the primary target audiences of his product line).

The culmination of the project was a formal presentation made by each team before a panel of judges, consisting of the company owner, two experienced, local marketing professionals, and me. The owner promised to use all or part of the winning team’s approach to market the company’s product and agreed to give each student of the winning team a \$250 Visa gift card. Thus, students had both financial and résumé-boosting incentives to perform well. The owner also agreed to cover any out-of-pocket presentation expenses up to \$100 per team.

As the judges listened to the presentations that first semester, it quickly became apparent the students lacked passion and motivation for the project. Members of the panel frequently commented about how difficult it was to select a winning approach. In general, the projects lacked creativity; some ideas seemed to be little more than knock-offs of existing approaches (or tired, old ones). It was clear the majority of students

hadn't invested enough time on the projects or the presentations (some which bordered on being unprofessional).

After some convincing (and a little pleading) on my part, the owner agreed to sponsor the project again the second semester. This time, I was determined to not make any assumptions regarding the skills of college students who were about to graduate and to provide them with the tools necessary to be successful.

I devoted several class sessions to the concepts of strategic creativity, professional presentation, influence, and risk-taking. Instead of merely assuming that students were frequently meeting outside of class to work on their projects (as the little time I had provided in class that first semester didn't seem to be well utilized), I set aside a greater amount of class time for them to work on their projects (despite the fact the physical classroom space really wasn't conducive to many groups working simultaneously). I actively engaged the groups and served as a resource throughout this time.

The end result: an outcome worse than the first. Not only were the presentations even more disappointing, the panel members became concerned about the overall quality of potential marketing graduates of the institution. My excitement and anticipation of providing students with a great professional opportunity quickly shifted to embarrassment. Worse than that, my views of today's college graduates had been negatively altered in a significant way.

So What's the Problem?

Initially, I believed the problem rested squarely with the students: they lacked the motivation, work ethic and creativity required to be successful. What student wouldn't want to earn some cash and gain additional résumé experience right before venturing into the world of job hunting? But, after some soul-searching, I realized that some of the problem resided with me. Perhaps I had made too many assumptions; perhaps I didn't create an inspiring environment for learning to take place. Naively, I had simply assumed what appealed to me would also appeal to them. In short, I failed to be an effective leader in the classroom.

Please don't misunderstand. I still believe the students didn't exhibit the necessary motivation, work ethic and creativity to be successful. However, I have also come to realize—and better understand—my responsibility as the leader of the class to create an environment that increases the likelihood of those traits occurring. Unfortunately for all involved, it took two semesters and a bunch of wasted time and money for me to reach that level of understanding.

Motivation and the Influence of Environment

Research in the field of psychology indicates that desired human behavior (or action) is a function of motivation, ability and opportunity. While the level of motivation determines the degree of attempt, ability and opportunity will determine whether the behavior can be successfully exhibited.¹ A leader can have the greatest impact by creating an environment that influences individual perceptions of both ability and opportunity. By reinforcing what people already know and tying that to available opportunities, leaders will have greater success in mobilizing desired behaviors as long as the necessary internal motivation to act is present.

My students could have been motivated in a variety of ways, of course, ranging from a genuine interest to learn to simply enduring the process in order to obtain the necessary credits to graduate. At the time, I didn't ask (at least conceptually) whether they would rather enjoy or endure the class, nor did I create an environment around the exercise that was dynamic and engaging regardless of what motivated them, one where students believed they had the necessary prior knowledge, or one where students could see the project's long-term value. Although the opportunity for learning was present, not all students *recognized* the opportunity. Combine this lack of recognition with the team aspect of the project, where varying levels of perception and motivation must come together, and the result is a recipe for an unproductive project environment and lackluster student performance.

Because of this experience, I now evaluate behavioral outcomes within a broader environmental context, one which includes both psychological and spatial elements. For example, think about a typical elementary classroom with its walls totally covered with student work, learning tools, visuals, and positive, colorful images. What would happen to this environment if these were all suddenly removed? What would it do to the energy in the room? How would it affect student feelings and motivation? For whatever reason, most classrooms in higher educational institutions are just like this...empty and void of positive influences. The same can also be said of a great many production floors, offices and workspaces. To maximize outcomes as a leader, I must continuously assess the work environment in relation to assigned tasks to be completed by doers at all levels.

The Big Three

Leadership, though, requires more than just an understanding of environment. Many other intangible aspects of leadership will directly influence the ultimate behavior of others. A quick perusal of the leadership section at Barnes & Noble or a search on Amazon.com (which will yield over 75,000 resources on leadership) can supply a nearly unlimited supply of advice. However, my experience suggests three core leadership principles, when applied regularly over time, have helped me connect with people and

impact their level of motivation: *Get Behind and Push*, *Walk the Talk*, and *Think Big, Execute Small*.

Get Behind and Push

Successful leaders must first be successful followers. Only leaders who know how to take direction, acknowledge responsibility, and accept accountability for their actions can truly understand leadership and its impact. I learned this very early in life. When I was a child, it was still socially acceptable to receive a spanking whenever “exhibiting” some unacceptable behavior. Fortunately, in my case the spankings administered by my parents hurt just enough to remind me that my behavior was not acceptable and would not be tolerated. My parents weren’t at all physically or mentally abusive; however, their actions played a large part in teaching me how to follow directions and gain the understanding that I would be held responsible and accountable for my actions.

Along with being a successful follower, a real leader also knows it’s the doers that get the job done. So point the direction (preferably one that’s a big leap) and get out the way while supporting the process. Strong leaders push others toward success. They recognize that when their people are successful, they too are successful, and success is mutual. In *You Don’t Know Me from Adam*, Adam Carroll and Adam Steen discuss how real leaders activate the law of reciprocity: by helping enough other people achieve their goals, your own goals cannot help but be met. Put simply, givers get. Succeeding faster only requires one thing: a selfless devotion to helping other people achieve success by assisting them with contacts, resources, information and guidance.²

This system of support also includes understanding and connecting to others by caring and being interested, by acknowledging and sharing in their ups and downs, by treating them fairly and as equally important, and by viewing them as partners instead of subordinates. Strong leaders create an almost “family-like” supportive environment where relationships are necessary, trust is built, and it’s in everyone’s long-term interest to help others succeed. They never put themselves in a position to take something of value from those they are leading, which would ultimately devalue effort and kill motivation.

Walk the Talk

Leadership is a daily process, not a destination. Before you can effectively lead others, you must be first able to lead yourself. In other words, a strong leader leads by example and knows that personal character will set the tone for everyone else. You must consistently display the character traits required by everyone to ensure success. Dependability, patience, self-discipline, integrity, confidence and a strong work ethic become daily expectations of you. Others cannot be expected to do that which you are unwilling to do, and a good leader knows that a consistent, high level of character is

critical, whether one “feels” like it every day or not. Character can’t be faked. One’s character is reflected when no one is watching, and others will see right through insincerity.

Not only should effective leaders set the bar of expectation, they should try to do “a little bit more” and consistently meet and exceed these expectations each and every time. Most people tend to value how others make them feel and will attempt to acquire the feelings they desire by associating themselves with those who exhibit them. (We like to be around others who make us feel better about ourselves.) By accepting a leadership role, you commit to a higher standard; one that not only requires a strong character but also demands a positive attitude.

A story of two bricklayers illustrates this concept. One day, a pedestrian stopped to admire the skill of two men who were laying bricks. She asked the first bricklayer, “What are you making?” In a somewhat gruff voice, the bricklayer responded, “About \$15.50 an hour.” At a loss for words, the pedestrian stepped over to the next bricklayer and asked, “Say, what are you making?” The second bricklayer happily replied, “I’m making the greatest cathedral in the world!”³ Same activity, same question, two totally different responses. A positive attitude will change one’s total perspective of something. A good leader chooses to see problems as opportunities to do great things versus something as mere labor.

If you have ever ridden a rollercoaster, you know that a wide variety of attitudes can be exhibited on any given ride. Some close their eyes, hold on for dear life, and can’t wait for the ride to be over, while others ride with eyes wide open, arms outstretched, and love every second. Same ride, two entirely different emotional responses, but those in the latter group typically take the lead by sitting up front.

Attitude is a game changer. It often reflects the tone of leadership and will dictate the response to failure. Babe Ruth had to strike out 1,330 times in order to hit 714 home runs (both once records in professional baseball) and lead the Yankees to multiple championships;⁴ Walt Disney was fired from his newspaper job for a lack of creative ideas;⁵ Thomas Edison (who held over 1000 patents for his inventions) was pulled out of school as a child after his schoolmaster called him “addle-minded” and “slow;”⁶ Michael Jordan missed over 9000 shots in his career, lost 300 games, and missed 26 final game-winning shots on his way leading the Bulls to six NBA championships;⁷ and Lee Iacocca, having been fired from Ford after 32 years of service, went on to lead Chrysler back to success after the company was on the brink of bankruptcy.⁸

Attitude is an outward expression of the heart. If you truly want others to be successful, then maintaining a consistent positive attitude is paramount. People can easily become discouraged by any one of a large number of aspects in their lives. A positive attitude by those in charge—as well as a positive environment—can help them overcome those

feelings and develop a renewed sense of energy. Strong leaders strive to exhibit a positive attitude every day in order to help others exhibit one on most days.

Think Big, Execute Small

Some people today tend to view the primary role of leaders as having and setting long-term vision (determining a direction) while letting others figure out how to get there. However, effective leaders are not only able to visualize which mountain to climb, but also the individual steps necessary to climb it.

In the 1991 comedy *What About Bob?* Bill Murray plays Bob Wiley, a character suffering from some serious “issues” (the clinical diagnosis given in the movie was “an extreme case of multi-phobic personality characterized by acute separation anxiety”). When Bob’s current psychologist pawns him off on Dr. Leo Marvin, an egotistical psychologist played by Richard Dreyfus, Bob shows up at Dr. Marvin’s office for an initial interview. As Dr. Marvin is getting ready to leave on vacation for a month, he shoves a copy of his new book, *Baby Steps*, into Bob’s hands and sends him on his way. The premise of *Baby Steps* is to help people achieve larger goals by visualizing much smaller, reasonable goals and then take a series of successive baby steps to get there. To the eventual dismay of Dr. Marvin, Bob totally takes the doctor’s words to heart. He is able to visualize and take each necessary, yet very difficult step towards “sharing” Dr. Marvin’s vacation with his family. Bob’s actions include walking to the bus terminal, getting on the bus, riding the bus to Camp Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire, finding Dr. Marvin by yelling for him in the middle of town, and then hijacking Dr. Marvin’s book interview with *Good Morning America*. Bob humorously “baby steps” his way into every aspect of Dr. Marvin’s life and ultimate psychotic breakdown.⁹

Although they desire a different outcome, strong leaders are like Bob. They are able to “see” a big leap, some potential great outcome or challenging opportunity, and then visualize and implement each baby step necessary to achieve it. With laser-like focus, they accomplish each required step in sequence while keeping the big picture and ultimate outcome in mind the entire time. They realize that 20% of their effort accounts for 80% of their success (Pareto’s Principle) so they don’t allow themselves to be overcome by irrelevant daily minutia. Able to manage many steps simultaneously while keeping the appropriate priority on each, leaders also recognize forward progress is a process. They are patient; sometimes great things may take some considerable time to accomplish. In the Old Testament of the Bible, King Solomon wrote, “It is better to finish something than to start it. It is better to be patient than to be proud.”¹⁰

Strong leaders will assemble great teams of doers who are able to execute. They will find, and nurture, those who can work both individually and collaboratively. They know that individual effort impacts the outcome of the entire group, so leaders are willing to work with doers to improve individual performance. Effective leaders are also willing to

reorganize tasks and people to gain maximum output or remove some people all together if necessary.

Imagine a snow globe. As long as each snowflake continues to fall, the desired effect is achieved. Sometimes, however, after the “snow” settles, the globe needs a good shake to reenergize it and keep things moving. Strong leaders are snow globe shakers. Have you shaken yours recently?

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