

Describing highly effective leadership (Part 1)

If we want to generate a higher return on investment (ROI) on our leadership, describing how leadership can be developed and characterizing why leadership is effective are all well and good, but what do highly effective leaders do? How do they behave? What fundamental abilities do they possess that enable them to achieve the kind of results that someone without these skills can't?

When practised at its highest form, this level of leadership exudes the kind of presence that people want to be close to. I'm going to explain this in two articles, so upfront, please forgive the lack of depth. Some of the aspects I will describe are entire fields of study, and all require life-long practice to develop. Here goes.

HIGHLY EFFECTIVE LEADERS:

1. Possess high self awareness. Self awareness is regularly cited, but poorly defined. Simply put, leaders are able to quickly know what they are observing, thinking, feeling and wanting in the moment. This is far harder than might seem, and the world of executive coaching and business consulting would hardly exist if everyone were able to see what they are looking at, work through complex problems alone, decrypt what the nagging unease that they are ignoring is trying to tell them, and know what they really want (and I mean really want). In a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous) world, self awareness ultimately governs our speed and capacity to act effectively. By design, effective leader development supports leaders to access and use more of what is between their ears and in their gut (and heart) for better results.

2. Are descriptive. Highly effective leaders are able to describe what is going on to others in a way that enables oth-

ers to understand them and doesn't make others reactive. From what I've observed, supporting leaders to be more capable in describing what's going on for them and sharing their thoughts invites dialogue rather than limits it, is a huge developmental opportunity for many leaders.

3. Are appreciative. Highly effective leaders are not "glass half-empty" in demeanour. They realize the power of spending time communicating what they want rather than what they don't want. They have mastered the ability to describe their positive experience of a situation, and communicate the meaningful impact that others bring to a challenge. Criticism and "my way or the highway" approaches have limited uses, and don't create engagement, only compliance (and spiffed-up resumé).

4. Are curious. Highly effective leaders are comfortable being challenged and disagreed with. They know there is a better decision or at least a better plan to execute that decision by engaging with others. They know this will push their buttons at times, even hurt, potentially to the depths of their own shame. Even though they get all that, they welcome other's input anyway, because highly effective leaders understand there is enormous value in understanding others.

5. They develop others. This is a highly effective leader's "key ingredient in the awesome," that is often the first casualty of high performance when autocratic, perfectionistic, ambitious and driven behaviours are accessed to achieve short-term results. I see this far too often in agriculture and in other sectors too. Managers want staff who are ready to go out of the box — no assembly required. Never mind whether the employee is a good fit with their organization. This outlook is best friends with, "You just can't find good help these days." Highly effective leaders are skilled at teaching and coaching.

This is far more than showing people what to do; it's about teaching people how to think, make a decision and act. Developing others is the path to having a self-managing business. The sort of business that allows the leader to leave and the business keeps running, good decisions keep getting made, and the leader is confident that if an actual problem occurs, the team will know when to call.

6. They are leaders primarily because they are learners. That's right, not because they are the boss. Highly effective leaders are continuous students and acknowledge the need for ongoing personal maintenance and improvement. I include maintaining resiliency in this domain. They have realized that personal sacrifice, while noble, is short-term minded and is not a sustainable way of leading. They've done the math, thought strategically and concluded that they are the asset that makes everything else tick (They are the bottle the awesome sauce is held in). Investing in their own care and development is a no-brainer. Personal development of some form is a regular part of their practice.

As I have coached leaders and facilitated leader development, I've noticed it's not enough to know something. I'm guessing nothing I've listed here so far will be a surprise. The difference is whether you practise these skills or not and are truly aware of how your presence has an impact on others. The research indicates the path to highly effective leadership cannot be travelled alone, but it can be travelled. Deciding to take that path has more opportunity and success at the end. **CG**

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