

Real Leadership

It's the source of progress.



by Dean Williams

THERE ARE ESSENTIALLY two kinds of leadership: real leadership and counterfeit leadership. Real leadership mobilizes people to face reality and progress. Counterfeit leadership puts a false set of tasks in front of people, distracting them from facing reality.

Much of what the popular literature presents as effective leadership is a recipe for counterfeit leadership. These notions are different variants on the same theme: “showing the way” and “getting people to follow.” Leadership that targets authentic progress must gauge success by the degree to which people engage the real problem—versus symptoms, decoy concerns, or false tasks. People either face reality or avoid reality. Answers to tough problems are rarely obvious, and real solutions elude precisely because they require due regard for the ingrained values and habits of the group.

To progress, people must face three realities: 1) the dangers and threats to the group, 2) the opportunities and possibilities available to the group, and 3) the current condition of the group as it pertains to dealing with the threat or taking advantage of the opportunities. If people deny or avoid reality, the company will suffer. If opportunities are not vigorously pursued, the organization will stall. And, if no one fronts up to the reality of the capabilities of the group to deal successfully with threats and take advantage of opportunities, then progress will elude the enterprise—and all the value it has amassed will be jeopardized.

The process of getting people to face reality is that of adaptive work. You can't just put reality in front of people and think they will accept it. People have hardwired defense mechanisms that lead them to filter reality and even deny it. Leaders must help people adapt to the new reality.

Six Common Challenges

Through the exercise of real leadership, conditions are created to give the people their best shot at success in the

context of the adaptive challenge. Here are six domains of adaptive challenge:

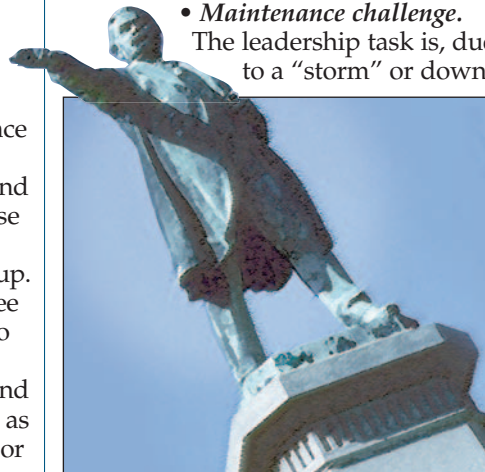
- **Activist challenge.** The leadership task is to get the people to entertain ideas and aspects of reality that threaten their prevailing worldview.

- **Development challenge.** The leadership task is to get the people to develop their latent capabilities, new skills, and underutilized resources.

- **Transition challenge.** The leadership task is to transition the group or organization to a new place or condition with minimal opposition and loss.

- **Creative challenge.** The leadership task is to get the group to do something that has never been done before.

- **Maintenance challenge.** The leadership task is, due to a “storm” or down-



turn, to protect and preserve group resources until better times.

- **Crisis challenge.** The leadership task is to defuse the explosiveness of the situation so that the real problem can be addressed and the group can return to normal functioning.

For someone to exercise real leadership and correctly diagnose the adaptive challenge requires a framework and methodology. Without it, it is easy to abuse power and engage in *counterfeit leadership*—the kind of actions, irrespective of intentions, that result in putting a false set of tasks before people. False tasks include all activities that have nothing to do with attending to the real adaptive challenge and facilitating progress—such as a false strategy, political game-playing, interdivisional rivalries, tolerance of counterproductive meetings where people skirt around real problem, the scape-

goating of another person or group, or the refusal to confront error and learn.

When people address a false set of tasks, they waste time and valuable resources and put the group in a precarious state. Counterfeit leaders waste time and resources by attending to their own spurious beliefs and putting a false set of tasks before people. For example, consider Enron CEO Kenneth Lay. In 2000, Enron had a market cap of \$65 billion and a share price of \$82. Lay was hailed as a great leader. One year later, Enron's share price dropped to 65 cents, and thousands of employees lost their jobs due to corporate greed, malfeasance, and financial chicanery.

Irresponsibility and the avoidance of reality—byproducts of counterfeit leadership—lead to the perpetuation of corrosive values and practices, deceitful dynamics, and the pursuit of a false set of tasks that destroy the wealth and resources of the company.

As we examine these cases, we see a pattern of the primary indicators:

- *Lack of clarity in regards to the real adaptive challenge*

- *A preoccupation with dominance as a way to generate compliance*

- *A failure to engage all people in facing the real work of progress*

- *An unwillingness to explore beyond the prevailing paradigm to find a solution*

- *The adamant and stubborn conviction that you alone have “the truth”*

- *Excessive emphasis on getting people to follow instead of getting them to deal with threat, learn, and discover*

In contrast, real leadership:

- *Constantly engages the people in reality testing to figure out what's real as it pertains to dangers, opportunities, and the condition of the group*

- *Works to diagnose the adaptive challenge that must be faced to progress*

- *Facilitates mid-course adjustments in strategic direction as discoveries are made*

- *Orchestrates adaptive work to get people to shift their values, habits, practices, and priorities and deal with reality.*

We need people who can provide real leadership, to deal with threats and take advantage of opportunities. If real leadership can make the difference between success and failure, progress and demise, then the study of leadership that mobilizes people to address reality and do adaptive work is paramount. **LE**

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ACTION: Practice real leadership.