

Are You a Good Enough Leader?

Lanz Lowen

In this era of increasing complexity and global competitiveness, the pressures organizational leaders face can be overwhelming. To meet these challenges, leadership books and gurus exhort executives to “unleash the entrepreneur within”, “raise their emotional IQ”, “empower their teams while partnering with their competitors.” These pressures and prescriptions can fuel executives’ already intense drive to achieve, saddling them with an internal pressure as well as a harsh critic that judges every move and misstep.

Executives run a modern-day gauntlet. In order to survive, they try to conscientiously replicate the 101 recommended behaviors from this year’s excellent companies, all the while fearing they may end up in a Dilbert panel or worse, a Dilbert-inspired hoax.

As an organization consultant I find myself in a dilemma – how to coach and support my clients without contributing to this prescriptive tyranny and its ability to overwhelm, distract, and pull executives away from their inherent abilities. How can a leader navigate their way through the rapidly changing wilderness while staying centered enough to comprehend and assimilate new information and skills? I find the work of psychologist Donald Winnicott helpful in identifying what might be essential.

In his research with mothers and children, Winnicott found that it was the mother’s ability to understand the infant’s early attempts at communication and connection that most influenced that child’s ability to grow into an independent being capable of creativity and interaction. To be “good enough”, a mother must be able to distinguish the cry that means, “I am cold” from the cry that means “I am hungry.” Appropriately supplying the necessary warm blanket validates and

reinforces the infant’s attempts to reach out and influence the world around it.

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This is opposed to the “not good enough” parent who fails to comprehend and appropriately respond to the infant’s gestures. Instead of validating the child, the “not good enough” parent looks to the child for validation. This forces the child to become compliant and prevents them from experiencing their own creative impulses.

The “good enough” model liberates parents - Mom no longer needs to be perfect or memorize Dr. Spock. Her natural inclination - to want to take care of her baby, to lovingly join with her, to anticipate and respond to her baby’s attempts to communicate - serve both parent and child.

As organizations struggle to move from rigid hierarchy toward shared leadership, I am not suggesting we view employees as children. What seems relevant here is that as in parenting, effective leadership is born out of relationship. Leadership is not about doing something to someone. The executive returning from a leadership seminar with fresh ideas and insights has to enlist employees in her learning process rather than covertly practice new techniques on ‘unsuspecting’ team members. Effective leadership starts with one’s self, but requires getting in rapport, of joining respectfully with an employee or team.

So what might “good enough” leadership look like? The term, “good enough” is not meant to imply mediocrity or an acceptance of the status quo. Rather, it focuses us on what is essential - utilizing our inherent abilities to connect, learn, and create with others.

Showing Up: Connecting to Self and Other

At the core of the concept of “good enough” is the notion of connection, a simultaneous connection to self and to other. The “good enough” leader is connected to her deeper self. Whether it comes from a relationship with a spiritual entity, one’s higher self, or personal values and principles, the good enough leader is able to dig ‘inside’ to a source of strength, guidance and wisdom. “What does my gut tell me is the right thing to do?” “How does my intuition tell me to respond to this group’s needs at this time?”

Most of my clients have life experience that helps them reflect on this inner wisdom. I hear stories of how they handled their 8 year old’s first questions about sex, or their teenager’s painful struggle to find friends. They remember clearly their last moments together with a dying friend or parent. They recall feeling scared and unprepared, of thinking “My God, what am I suppose to say? What should I do?” But they report when they followed their ‘internal impulses’, their expressions of concern and support or their simple grasp of a bony hand seemed to make a difference. In that moment, they gave themselves permission to act from a place of inner wisdom. Perhaps they might have been more prepared, more articulate, more demonstrative, but in hindsight, they speak of knowing in their heart that it was enough.

When I ask clients if they ever experience moments such as these at work, responses vary. Some readily recall similar stories - the day they told a department they were being eliminated, the coaching they did to help an employee turn their performance around, the tough decisions they encouraged a project team to face. Others become quiet, eyes dropping away, perhaps saddened or puzzled at coming up empty. And many respond with a litany of reasons why they shouldn’t or don’t share that part of themselves at work.

A consequence of a work world that rewards speed and expedience is that a more personal, wiser part of ourselves is disregarded. We are seduced by our quick fixes, our ability to execute, the adrenaline-rush of handling the immediate crisis. Focusing solely on the rational business-at-hand may help us look good and feel secure, but something at the core of our ‘being’ gets lost in all the ‘doing’. We lose touch with our feelings, our values, our inherent good judgment, each of which is essential in reaching and influencing others.

A client who was struggling to be a more responsive listener, reported proudly how he had made a special point to allow a group of employees to vent. As he described the experience, it was clear that he had not been touched by their concerns, but was merely employing a tactic so that they could “get it out and move on.” I questioned whether his employees actually felt ‘heard’ or more likely experienced him as patronizing and wasting their time.

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In this case, “showing up” would have meant listening to understand, being present to what employees were feeling and what those feelings were triggering in him. If he had made himself vulnerable by being fully present as a human being, his employees might have felt heard, connected and motivated even if he couldn’t fully comply with their requests. My client was certainly capable of showing up in this way as I heard from one of his employees in a later telephone call. “Sometimes my Director shows a different side to himself, a more personal side. He listens and he questions and he helps me find clearer water. I leave feeling renewed and uplifted. He’s so good when he’s in that place, I just wish he would do it more often.”

Even when we believe in “showing up”, most of us are very good at blocking this side of ourselves. We think, “I can’t say that.” “I shouldn’t upset them.” “That’s not appropriate at work.” Perhaps we stop from revealing ourselves because we don’t trust that deeper part of ourselves or we don’t trust that others can handle that deeper part of ourselves. Paradoxically, the consequence is our employees are less trusting of us.

In the face of missing data, people speculate and then act as if their speculations are true. In working with a senior team of a small company where the CEO’s style is somewhat close-lipped, I heard many different comments from the officers explaining why the strategic planning process had become so prolonged. Each had a different explanation for why the CEO was “dragging his feet”, e.g. “He’s already decided what he wants, he’s just feeding us bits of information so that eventually we will arrive at his pre-ordained conclusions.”

Although his team’s worst fears were unfounded, they were fueled by the CEO’s reluctance to share his real reasoning – that he saw the process as an opportunity to develop his officers’ ability to think strategically. “I can’t tell them that they don’t think strategically; most of them have MBA’s”. However, in his desire to protect them from his perception of their development needs, he was creating a wedge between himself and his team as well as undermining the strategic planning process. If either the team or the CEO were to “show up” – to explain their fears and motivations - the pursuing conversation might result in more efficient ways of developing the officers’ strategic skills, a more vital strategic planning process, and increased trust between CEO and team members.

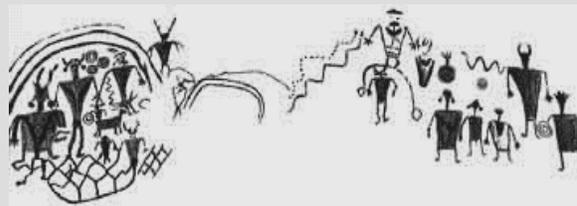
Clarifying Intentions: Putting Stakes in the Ground

Along with attention comes intention. The mother’s overall intention is clear - to love and support her baby to grow to be a healthy, vibrant adult. However, at any point along the

The New Millennium

As we enter a new millennium, I wonder about how we view the role of a leader and the challenges they face. I equate the current demands on leaders as more equivalent to the struggles encountered by hunters and gatherers than to the farmers, rulers and owners in more recent times. The hunters and gatherers were constantly scanning, exploring and utilizing an environment that shifted, often drastically as they foraged into ever new territories.

I imagine peoples traveling out of Africa, traversing Asia, crossing into the Americas. Each day was filled with surviving and learning about the new things they encountered. Which plants were edible? Which animals were to be feared? In what ways did the land and the seasons signal that it was time to move on? Their survival must have required incredible flexibility and the use of all their faculties in being able to quickly learn about each new ecosystem in which they found themselves.



Our organizational leaders increasingly find themselves in environments with unimagined opportunities and unforeseen threats. Leading in such an environment requires a tremendous ability to learn quickly, coupled with a willingness to give up outdated knowledge and ways of behaving.

As much as we know about where we’ve been, we lack knowledge about where we are going. And yet our ancestors made their way across huge continents. How can we tap into that deeper wisdom that must have informed their lives? How can we show up to meet each moment with the awareness that we have much to discover? How do we build our base of knowledge and expertise and make meaningful choices in our lives without being held by our stories, our paradigms, our pride? In this new era, if we are not adept at exploring

way she may need to revisit this intention and clarify what it requires of her at this stage in her child's growth. What stake does she need to put in the ground so that her 4 year-old understands the difference between 'phantom playmates' and 'fibbing' to her parents?

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Likewise, the leader's intentions require periodic reflection. How do I see my role and how do I want to be as a leader? In what ways am I living up to this? Chris Argyris speaks of the importance of framing – how we see ourselves, others, and the task at hand. How executives view themselves and their role has a huge impact on their actions, how they are perceived, and their ability to achieve the results they desire.

A president of a subsidiary became increasingly frustrated with the demands and controls of his foreign-based parent company. After repeated "reversals", his view of his role shifted from entrepreneurial leader to "manager of the bottom-line". He saw his choices as very limited and he subsequently became increasingly involved in the day-to-day minutia of his direct reports.

His successor, facing the same difficulties, envisioned his role as a developer. His goals were to develop a strong executive team, to develop close partnerships with the parent company and to develop a business that met the financial requirements of the parent company but also offered challenging opportunities to employees. With his intentions clearly in mind he put a series of stakes in the ground that moved him and the organization toward his vision. His intentions were reflected in not only what he did, but how he did it. One of his first moves as president was to involve his entire team as well as key players from the parent company in the development of an overall business plan.

Intention, whether in the form of visionary goals or a clearer understanding of role serves as a reminder of what's important and why we go through the time and effort to "show up." If we are not clear about what we are seeking to create, we easily get lost in daily "To Do" lists and lose touch with our deeper motivations and higher self. The clearer we are about what we intend, the greater the likelihood we will recognize and seize the opportunities that can lead us toward our goals.

Learning Together: Finding our Way to Results

One of the joys of being a parent is to marvel at how rapidly an infant can grow and change. From wide-eyed stares come enchanting smiles which beget gurgles and coos followed by first attempts to speak. In order to respond to the infant's needs, the "good enough parent" is continually deciphering new behavior. Given this rapid development, the infant and the parent are forced to continually learn together.

Leaders must be continually discovering our new world as it emerges. Although essential, it is not enough for a leader to put a stake in the ground and proclaim "here is where we're headed." In order to encourage understanding and to achieve the necessary alignment and participation, a leader must also share their thinking and open their reasoning to scrutiny. "This is where we are headed and this is why. Does this make sense to you? Are we missing anything?"

The good enough leader must encourage joint learning. S/he can have great skills, experience and vision, but must hold them lightly. The "willingness to look again" may reveal new possibilities or cracks in the plan.

Unlike the infant or small child, as adults we have adopted many patterns that can block our ability to learn. Most of us are invested in being right, having control, saving face, all of which prevent us from truly inquiring into our own and others' thinking.

Recently, I taught a course in shared leadership with a team of high-tech engineers, salespeople and administrative assistants in Beijing. When the first two participants volunteered 'Chairman Mao' as the leader they most admired, I began to worry that the culture in China was incompatible with the values and requirements of shared leadership. My fears increased throughout the first day when only the male managers in the group responded to my questions and all others deferred to them.

However, on the second day, I noticed a remarkable shift. In each experiential activity there was collegial participation and men and women regardless of their roles constructively confronted one another, challenged the process and gave each other difficult feedback. Their performance on the activities and their reflection afterwards surpassed what I had seen by their American counterparts.

At the end of the week, I asked them about their ability to learn so quickly and their answer was as surprising as their behavior. They saw it very simply. "It's an American company so why wouldn't we do it the way that has worked

for you?" I was struck at how little resistance they had to trying something new or seeing their roles in a different light. I suspect their flexibility stemmed in part to their cultures' lack of emphasis on individualism and its rigid story telling of "this is who I am and how I operate". How different this is to my own experience of learning Tai Chi in which I silently bristle every time I am corrected even though I know this Chinese art takes decades to master.

"Good enough" leadership frees us from the trap of relentless perfectionism, but it is still a formidable challenge. Like the Chinese team, we must have the courage to be present to ourselves and others, yet simultaneously hold ourselves and our thinking lightly enough to let go of what no longer serves us. In this way, we become "good enough" to jointly create the future we desire for ourselves and our organizations.

Lanz Lowen is an organization consultant who coaches executives and their teams to more effectively learn, communicate and accomplish results together.

- ❑ Analyzing their own cases, clients identify the patterns that block their effectiveness. They then explore how they can shift their view of their role, task, and perceptions of others in order to modify their own behavior and achieve the results they desire.
- ❑ Using the Career Architect system and a Strategic Alignment template developed by Catalyst Consulting, clients create an integrated set of compelling personal and career goals and a strategy for achieving them.
- ❑ Through 360 degree and other feedback assessments, clients discover strengths, weaknesses and potential career stallers, and enlist colleagues and team members in on-going joint learning.