

“Learning to Lead”
Leading Yourself, Leading Others, and Leading an Organization
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Book Note by Dave Kraft

Develop the ability to formulate a compelling vision of the future and to inspire others to help make that vision a reality. Replace bullying with persuasion— I’ve tried to be both a dedicated student and a successful practitioner of the art of leadership. Growing into leadership begins with self-leadership. The most crowded trail is never the way to achieve extraordinary success.

Two things are essential: a deep personal commitment to excellence in everything you do and a commitment to continual improvement.

- Reject stereotypical thinking
- Break out of your comfort zone
- Take a calculated risk
- Pick jobs with quantifiable results
- Keep your future options open
- Exceed your job description

The ways we think define the box in which we find ourselves. I learned to think of these types of choice as a reversible decisions—one I could undo if it didn’t work out. Self-awareness, combined with the willingness to reinvent myself, made it possible for me to open a new door— A person who is at heart a SEAL may never be content living the life of a sailor, while a natural-born sailor is likely to be ineffective and unhappy trying to fill the boots of a SEAL.

Assuming “**Positive Intent**” can be an empowering strategy that disarms defensiveness and turns potential enemies into allies. I’ve found it to be one of my most effective secret weapons. The biggest challenge any leader faces is the difficulty of changing people’s perceptions of what is possible. The job of the leader, Napoleon said, is “To define reality and to give hope.” A technical problem? Sure. But it was also a matter of transforming the way we thought. It also taught us that there was almost nothing we couldn’t accomplish by applying some clear thinking, tough-minded and open communication, a lot of hard work, and a bit of creativity.

This approach to decision making—perhaps “decision avoiding” would be a better description— had even been given its own catchphrase: “Aetna Nice.” Most people in business are interested in meeting expectations—but they’re not interested in meeting demands.

My goal wasn’t simply to give people the answer to an immediate dilemma but rather to educate them in a new way of thinking about problems, knowing that if they mastered this technique, it would help them generate their own solutions for years to come.

The company's problems in the late 1990s and early 2000s weren't caused by any lack of talent, knowledge, or dedication, but rather by misaligned systems and unfortunate failures of leadership. Sometimes retraining an organization to achieve the impossible does demand new blood. But in many cases the talent you need is already in-house, under your nose, just waiting to be unleashed. My job as a leader was to show them a new way of thinking—to demonstrate, through coaching, a clear articulation of my positions and my expectations, and through my own personal example, how they could think their way out of the box in which they felt trapped.

This, to me, is the essence of leadership—the art of helping people free themselves from the mental constraints that limit what they can achieve. One of my favorite mantras, “When all else fails, get the facts!” It's startling how often the biggest barrier to people doing their jobs is their own organization! You'll find that everyone varies in their ability to tolerate uncertainty.

When you are working on a problem with your team, knowing the decision-making maturity of the others in the room is important.

I have certain rules of thumb that I think are helpful in recognizing whether you have the data needed to make a good-enough decision under real-world conditions of uncertainty and risk:

- Listen to many voices
- Create a clear, simple decision framework
- Gauge the importance of any missing data
- Avoid recency bias
- Protect your future flexibility
- Take levels of risk into account
- Don't dither needlessly. Avoiding a decision rarely improves the ultimate outcome of the problem
- Disagree but commit
- Heed your inner voice

I've seen instances in which flawed decisions were made because of broad, macro-level assumptions that were never examined—

I don't recommend obsessing over minor details for their own sake. Instead, figure out which details are the important ones—and then do whatever you need to do to make sure you've got those details right. Encourage leaders in every department to move from being internally focused to being customer focused. Reframing is all about uncovering new and exciting possibilities you never imagined before.

Without intending to, they'd allowed Aetna to drift into a situation in which the company lacked a clear, overarching strategy that united all its varied activities behind a single fundamental purpose; asking fundamental questions that helped us get back to basics.

“It isn't what we don't know that gives us trouble. It's what we know that ain't so.” ~ Will Rogers

Here are some suggestions for positive, constructive questioning that you may find effective. Avoid starting questions with the word “why.” Avoid yes-or-no questions. Don't ask questions for which you think you already know the answer. Actively listen to the answers people give you. Ask follow-up questions. Encourage others to ask questions, including ones that are “stupid” or “naïve.” Use questions to ensure that your team members are all on the same page. When problems arise, question the issue, not the person. When tough questions are needed, use them with care. Asking the tough questions in the right way can help to ensure that the facts are revealed, making it possible for the appropriate decision to be reached.

One of the most crucial tasks of the leader is to help her team members set priorities and stay focused on the tasks that are most important. When an organization is fundamentally well run, serious unexpected problems shouldn't keep arising. If serious emergencies requiring “all hands on deck” seem to crop up every few days, this is probably a sign of important underlying leadership problems.

It's far better if you can avoid crisis mode through smart, deliberate planning. Defining the importance of any issue includes understanding the whole context in which you're operating. Unless you get down into the weeds and analyze what is truly happening, you are likely to be blindsided at some point by a serious problem that may derail the project completely. When circumstances are dire, the importance of clear and constant communication is greater than ever.

One of the most important crucial challenges you'll face as a leader is the development of an empowered, highly motivated team. A fundamental element in building your team is recruiting and hiring the right people in the first place. I suggest you make a deliberate effort to choose people who are different from those you already employ. Avoid the trap of hiring too many people in your own image.

I could help formulate a top-down vision for our industry. But I couldn't make it real without the help of gifted assistant. My lady used her people skills, her communication talents, and her leadership instincts to become an amazingly effective right-hand person for me.

Building your team isn't only about choosing the right people. It's also about creating an organizational culture that enables your team members to give the best of themselves to the organization. Became concerned only when people let the clock dictate the amount of work they put in rather than obeying the genuine demands of the job. Setting appropriate expectations for your team members involves understanding their individual capacities.

An organization that accomplishes great things without outrageous work schedules is one of the rewards you get for building a smart system and staffing it with talented people in the first place.

I learned to be a tactical parent—to pick and choose the most important moments when I needed to be there for my kids, and to make the most of those.”

In addition to being a good listener on an everyday basis, you should purposefully make time for one-on-one meetings with those who rely on your leadership. As CEO, I met regularly with each of the ten people who reported directly to me and also with their key direct reports—about twenty-five people in all. We included time for a brief recap of how the team member’s most important projects were unfolding, a conversation about the biggest challenges or obstacles they were wrestling with, and a look at the biggest goals they’d set for the months ahead.

Making sure these brief but meaningful conversations were sacred on my schedule, and not postponed or canceled for other activities, was an important part of my leadership style. “You’ve always got to show people the love!” Just being there, to talk with them and to listen deeply, is an essential first step. Most people at every level simply don’t devote enough time, thought, and energy to the two big challenges involved in clear communication—the challenge of conveying your messages clearly and the challenge of understanding and absorbing the messages sent by others. Learning to correctly grasp what I call the strategic intent of those in important positions above you and below you in the organizational hierarchy is a vital leadership practice,

Here are some techniques used to keep board members informed, happy, and supportive.

- Frequent personal communication
- Rich flow of information
- Careful planning for board meetings
- Availability as needed between meetings
- Try to see your department and your role in it from the two-up perspective

“Everything is built on relationships.” Remember that the people you report to are just that—people— and treat them that way, as human beings with interests, priorities, needs, problems, and goals that are important to them. Help them achieve their long-term objectives, and you will become a valued member of their team—with significant long-term benefits to you and your career.

There are several strategies you’ll want to consider if you find yourself in the position of having more than one boss. Master the differing communication and management styles of each boss. Be as open and up front as possible. Help your bosses lead you better. Don’t take sides or get caught in the middle. Learn from both bosses.

Understanding and respecting the goals and values of the people below you in the organization is crucial to your effectiveness in motivating and leading them. I’d made it quite clear that I expected everyone who reported to me to be honest and unafraid about communicating what they saw happening around them—even if that meant sharing bad news.

There are times and circumstances when it's healthy, even necessary, to connect with the people who report directly to someone you supervise. Not insisting on rigid adherence to a "chain of command." There are effective ways to maintain your connections with the people two down on the chart.

Here are some tips on how to make it work. Make communication across hierarchical lines part of your leadership routine. Invite open-ended feedback about the organization and its workings. Be open about the fact that you are in touch with people at various levels of the organization. Be available to hear people's problems or complaints—but always close the loop by keeping the relevant manager involved. Don't give work direction to those you don't personally supervise.

Don't shoot the messenger. Let everyone know that they're responsible for keeping the lines of communication open and clear. If everyone in your organization isn't on the same page, the chances of achieving your long range goals will be severely diminished.

Maybe the single most important skill any leader must develop is the ability to communicate—to share ideas clearly, engagingly, persuasively. Learning how to present yourself and your ideas in a way that audiences find authentic, understandable, and persuasive.

I tend to listen and reflect more than I talk. Audiences were distracted by my delivery rather than persuaded by my message. Simplify your message to a handful of key points—no more than four or five concepts for a fifteen- to twenty-minute speech. Be sure to let your enthusiasm and passion for the topic shine through.

It's important to accept the reality that no leader can ever find a way to please everyone. You've got to come across as realistic but confident. It's a tough line to walk. I don't have all the answers, and as a leader, I reserve the right to learn. To be an effective leader, you should learn how to instill an appropriate sense of the seriousness of problems throughout your team.

Some "Abilities" to have:

- To reframe problems
- To discover the facts behind a challenge
- To pose probing questions
- To define what's truly important
- To recruit a talented team of employees
- To develop winning and innovative strategies
- To communicate clearly
- To speak powerfully
- Shaping, nurturing, and enforcing a corporate culture

- Defining and sharing values
- Developing an inspiring vision for the organization's future
- Guiding the creation of an innovative competitive strategy
- Assembling human capital
- Leading the organization through times of crisis

I needed to be guiding the allocation of financial capital

The best way to inspire high performance for most people is through positive goals that transcend the immediate, short-term objectives of the company or the individual worker. In my view, the leader's goal in most industries should be to build a culture that insists on dedication to excellence— find ways to connect the organization's goals to the highest personal aspirations of team members.

Four core values that we strove to embody in all our actions:

- Integrity
- Quality service and value
- Excellence and accountability
- Engaged employees

As I've noted, when I joined Jack Rowe at the helm at Aetna, the company was losing almost a million dollars a day. I wanted to avoid being stampeded into making a decision based on one point of view. To make our problem-solving sessions effective, I also had to create a culture of honesty and transparency. Establishing and enforcing clear standards of communication and cooperation is one essential team-building task that only the leader can do. Attack the problem, not the person. When you have bad news, deliver it early and in person. Leading an organization is a marathon, not a sprint. My mantra was "Challenge the issue, not the person."

When office politics threatens to stall your organization's progress, assuming positive intent will help your team focus on the real problems rather than getting bogged down in needless personal battles. Rich had many strengths, but a talent for crisp, clear communication was not one of them. Each of us must play the hand we are dealt. If it would feel good to say it, don't! There's more than one effective way to lead people, and it takes a variety of talents and styles to build the most powerful organization.

Napoleon's definition of leadership: "To define reality and to give hope." As a leader, you need to understand and respect team member's varying perspectives, even if you view some of their opinions as shortsighted or flawed.

I made a special effort to talk just a little, but to listen a lot—suspending judgment, withholding criticism, and trying not to offer snap opinions or top-of-the-head solutions to the problems I heard about. It would be a mistake to make any big decisions before we understand what's really going on.

Reality is constantly changing, and your vision of it needs to be constantly tested and refined. Making and maintaining one-on-one connections with people throughout your organization is a crucial leadership skill. Without an honest picture of reality, your vision of the future is just idle daydreaming. Based on this vision, we put in place detailed annual operating plans, along with three-year strategic plans with yearly updates. Some find it hard to operate on different levels—operational and strategic. Truly effective leaders can do both. Yet while the systems I handled grew enormously over time, the underlying principles remained much the same.

Focusing on operational details while developing a strategic vision for an organization as a whole is not paradoxical. Operational activity builds the bridge to a strategic future. Your first cadre of supporters will help spread your message through their daily words and actions. Get your message clear in your mind and to communicate it as accurately and compellingly as possible.

Get people to honestly evaluate your communication: What did I say that I shouldn't have said? Are there things I didn't say that I should have? When and how did I lose the audience? What did I say that really hit home? What can I do better next time? If people get the impression that you aren't comfortable hearing bad news, they quickly stop delivering it!

When you have a message that everyone in your organization must understand, try to communicate it through every possible means—whenever you are trying to express a complex idea in an easily understood manner, you need a model for it—preferably one that takes a vivid visual form. If you have an idea that you can't model, it probably has too much clutter. The better everyone understands the purpose of an organization, the better equipped they are to make smart decisions. Another valuable communication skill for any organization leader is to establish shared definitions for important terms, ideas, and concepts.

You'll find you can do a much better job of motivating people if they feel they know you and sense that you truly care about them, their needs, and their concerns. "If there's something that will make you feel really good to say—something you are itching to say—don't say it."