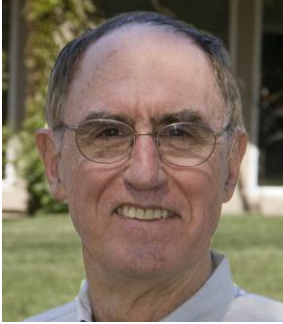


The Essence of Leadership

By Doug Hignell



Being an excellent leader is both a simple and a complex task. In what follows, it is my hope to offer a few short reflections on what it takes to be a leader worthy of following.

First, great leaders view building caring relationships as essential to success. I honestly believe that the very core of leadership is to approach those we lead as having significance—to see them as just as important as ourselves. Though they don't need to be our best friends, those we lead need to know that we genuinely care for them.

We can put this care on display by the quality of our relationships with family, friends, peers, and employees. People will willingly follow a leader that they admire and who has their best interests in mind. However, they will grudgingly follow a self-centered leader, especially one who uses fear as a primary motivator. This concept rings no truer than in the home.

Honoring and encouraging those we lead naturally follows from placing a high value on developing these caring, healthy relationships. Most human interaction is not neutral, so when two or more people come together and then part, those people are typically either encouraged or discouraged by their time together. Even when the need arises to confront someone, we should strive to handle the situation in such a way that, when all is said and done, the person feels honored and cared for.

In addition, leading by example is profoundly important. Living a balanced life—including work, family, rest, exercise, and a healthy diet—sends a clear message to those around us that we care about ourselves. If we care about ourselves and continue to work on improving our lives and characters, then those we lead will be inspired, as well as more apt to believe that we care about them and their needs, too.

Attitude is another key to excellent leadership. Consider the following quote: “He who has the most hope has the most influence.” As leaders, we can influence the attitude of those around us, even if we don't say a word.

If we arrive at home or work discouraged, upset, or with some other negative attitude, those around us will quickly “catch” whatever attitude we bring. However, if we arrive full of hope, regardless of the situation, then that hope will be “infectious” and others will begin to be hopeful, too. As a leader at The Hignell Companies, if I can't arrive at work full of hope, I am probably better off not interacting with people until I have adjusted my attitude. Without hope, my influence may cause more harm than good.

Integrity and generosity are two additional keys to leadership. Integrity means doing the right thing, even when no one is looking. If we don't personally model integrity in all areas

of our lives, then we simply can't expect it from those we lead. For example, working hard and giving our best in each and every situation is an integrity issue, as we can't ask others to give their best if we ourselves don't.

Generosity looks like putting the needs of others ahead of our own, wherever possible. This includes providing fair salaries in return for honest work. It also includes sharing our time, talents, and resources with others, especially those in need.

Great leaders have several management styles and know the appropriate one for any given situation. We have all seen the "pyramid" model, in which the leader is at the top, making all of the decisions and directing others. There are times when leaders need to use this authoritarian management style because, sometimes, leaders must simply lead.

Yet, the majority of the time, a healthier leadership style is the "upside down pyramid." In this model, as leaders, we are on the bottom, serving the people who directly report to us. If we help each person who reports to us succeed in their own responsibility, then we will find success, as well. A great leader knows when to use each style and can switch back and forth between multiple styles throughout the day.

In conclusion, the goal of great leadership is to create atmospheres of a caring community around us in which people flourish—a "safe place." This encourages those we lead to feel both involved and empowered to effectively and creatively accomplish their own, individual responsibilities.

Each time we walk into a leadership position—either at home, work, or somewhere else—we should ask ourselves this simple question: "How can I increase the success of those I lead?" Doing so will go a long way in improving our leadership capabilities, and we will, without question, see a positive change in those we lead.