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# A Leader's Journey

## *Why the Leadership Challenge Matters*

**F**or the past couple of years I've been a big proponent of the Leadership Challenge, a program that I believe can greatly improve anyone's leadership. Knowing my dislike for canned, one-size-fits-none solutions, several of my colleagues have asked me why I'm so committed to this particular program.

The answer is easy: it validates the leadership lessons it's taken me over forty years to learn. But to explain why this is so, I'll need to take you on my personal leadership journey.

### **Uncle Sam's Way**

My first formal leadership training came courtesy of the US Army. Not all of the lessons, though, were taught in the classroom.

One of the first lessons any new officer learns is to lead by example. This was particularly true of my branch of service, armor. An officer who could not demonstrate competency as a tank commander was not taken seriously by the enlisted men he had to lead. You had to prove that you understood what was important to your men and that you shared those values.

The army also stressed the importance of taking care of your

team but it was the troops I served with who taught me what this really meant. I saw an unpopular commander relieved because his men deliberately sabotaged a major inspection. The only areas that passed were those under my direct control, a reward from my soldiers for my efforts on their behalf.

My final lesson was the importance of clearly stating what your expectations were. In army parlance, you needed to be clear on your mission and communicate its importance to your team. They had to understand and support what you were trying to do well enough to accomplish it without you being present.

### **Nobody Walks In Step Here**

These three lessons: leading by example, looking out for subordinates, and setting clear expectations stayed with me as I made the transition to civilian life. They worked fine during my time in the security industry which is relatively hierarchical like the military. But as I moved into management, I realized that I needed to revise my leadership philosophy a bit.

The big "ah, ha!" moment came when I understood that a manager's job was to provide his or her team with whatever they needed to do their job.

I interpret this rather broadly. The most obvious need is for tangible things. For example, when I became Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco, my staff was equipped with cast off computers that were years out of date. It took a bit of effort but it was relatively easy to replace them with new ones that improved both staff efficiency and morale.

But there are intangible needs as well. Implementing a work plan made a difference. Counseling problem employees and providing professional development opportunities helped as well. Sometimes the need was for something less pleasant; I was surprised at how well morale improved when I terminated an underperforming employee and had another moved to a different department.

### **This Guy is a Pain in the Neck!**

One other leadership trait I learned was a refusal to accept the status quo. It started in the military when I learned that every regulation had contained within it a process for circumventing that regulation. It was raised to a fine art during my time with FEMA where I learned that while there were those who looked to regulations to tell them what they could do, there were a small handful of us who looked at them as telling us only what we couldn't do.

With perspective, it is possible to think creatively and to develop unexpected solutions to unforeseen problems. I was fortunate to work for division directors who valued effective solutions over strict adherence to rules. My friend, Ken Chin, and I developed a three part test for anything we wanted to do that pushed the edge of the envelope:

1. Is it prohibited by regulation?
2. Is it ethical?
3. Is it the right thing to do?

If what we wanted to do was neither unlawful nor unethical and accomplished our goal of providing service to disaster victims, we'd give a try. I still use this test whenever I'm unsure of a solution, by the way.

### **Enter the Leadership Challenge**

If you've been following my newsletter articles on the Leadership Challenge, you should by now have realized that I was using the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership without realizing what they were:

1. Model the Way – lead by example
2. Inspire a Share Vision – be clear on your mission and why it's important to the team
3. Challenge the Process – Don't accept the status quo
4. Enable Others to Act – provide your team with what they need to get the job done
5. Encourage the Heart – Take care of your team

But was this just coincidence? The Five Practices are certainly very broad. What sold me was that the developers of the Leadership Challenge, Barry Posner and Jim Kouzes, backed their findings with over 30 years of research. Their findings are remarkably consistent across the globe, even considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, age and so forth.

Another factor that got my attention was their premise that leadership is a learned behavior and so can be taught. We all know remarkable individuals who seem to be natural leaders. But I have also seen people with less promise develop into competent and effective leaders.

This is the essence of the Leadership Challenge – understanding the behaviors common to effective leaders and developing a plan to increase their frequency in your own life. It's a solid system and it works. 