

— A BOLD CUP OF —  
**LEADERSHIP  
CAFFEINE™**

A SHORT GUIDE TO STIMULATE  
**HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP**



**ART PETTY**

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# INTRODUCTION

It never ceases to amaze me how much control we have as individuals and leaders over our ability to be successful.

We can choose to walk in the door every single day with fierce resolve for knocking down obstacles. And we can choose to end the day with a greater appreciation for our team members and a personal commitment to be a better leader tomorrow.

In-between those two day-parts, we can choose to view mistakes by team members as teachable moments, crises as great opportunities to display grit, and successes as opportunities to place people in the spotlight.

Armed with the right attitude, there's nothing a motivated leader cannot accomplish. Use the ideas and insights here to help form and frame and sustain that great attitude so essential to success.

Yours in great leadership,



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# WINNING THE INNER GAME OF LEADING

Harvard Business School Professor, Linda Hill's, description of context faced by everyone in a leadership role in this era: "*overload, ambiguity and conflict*" is spot on. It is a much more articulate labeling of what I describe as, "the leadership blender." And it reflects the state of existence of a large percentage of leaders as they strive to do more with less, faster, and with more impact.

You could not ask for three more challenging contextual sets of circumstances than overload, ambiguity and conflict. Our typical responses to these environmental characteristics practically guarantee mistakes and sub-optimizing.



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## What's a Leader to Do?

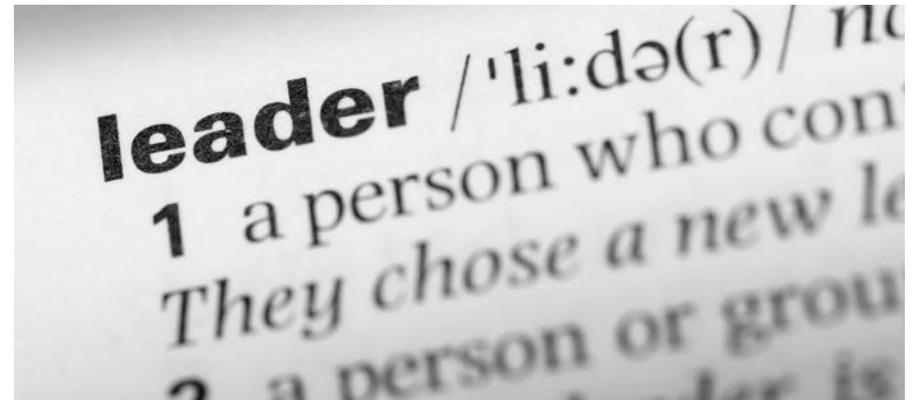
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The effective leaders I've observed in environments characterized by overload, ambiguity and conflict all have their own approaches and techniques, however, they share a common trait: they have control over their "inner game of leading."

They are hyper-aware of their role in parsing the noise and helping their team members learn to navigate forward through the fog. They operate with a focus on creating a marketplace of often conflicting ideas, where people are challenged to both diverge and ultimately converge in their thinking and actions.

They understand the need in fast-paced circumstances to insert occasional pauses to allow people to consider and re-think. And they understand how to come out of a pause and promote deliberate, quick experiments that facilitate learning and improved decision-making.

They rush towards ambiguity, comfortable in their discomfort with the lack of a clear way forward. These effective leaders understand that the winner today is the firm or team who connects external events and systemic or structural changes in markets and industries to new solutions and approaches.



They strive to be the disruptor, rather than defend against disruption.

And while these behaviors characteristics may paint the picture of some super-being—an uber-leader, all-knowing in the face of adversity—it's not that. These individuals often defy categorization in their styles. They're just individuals attuned to their role in helping others move forward.

Their command of the inner-game helps them fight through the paralyzing potential of self-doubt and the debilitating effects of hubris and arrogance. They are uniquely and distinctly attuned to their role in setting the stage and adjusting the lights and creating the environment for the real actors to do their best work.

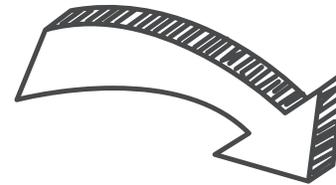
# 4 BIG IDEAS TO RENEW YOUR LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS DAILY:

- 1 Rethink your role.** Today's leader must offer "burden relief" to his/her team members. Knock down walls and eliminate barriers and allow your team members to apply their creativity and talents to their core work.
- 2 Decomplexify.** (Yes. I'm minting words.) Ambiguity in our businesses and markets is the order of the day. Strive to eliminate complexity and allow your team members to focus on taking bite-sized chunks out of elephantine challenges.
- 3 Adjust your attitude every day before work.** Take a few minutes in the parking lot at the coffee shop or at your desk before the busy-ness starts and focus on what you can do to make a difference today.
- 4 Care for your team members as humans, not just resources.** Pay attention, ask questions, and offer support. The simple act of caring may be the most powerful leadership advice you will ever receive.

# 5 BEWARE THE 5 WARNING SIGNS OF A LEADERSHIP MELTDOWN:

**1 When you're feeling isolated.** There are times when leading others is one of the loneliest jobs in the world, however, when you're beginning to feel like it's you against the world, you're on the brink of some bad moves.

**2 When you quit trusting your team members.** Poor numbers, some negative surprises or project disasters can make you question the people you've tapped for leadership roles.



## ACTION PROMPTER:

Invite an **objective outsider** to your next team meeting and ask them to describe what they observed.

**3** **When you keep changing your mind on key decisions.** Your inability to stick to a decision invites confusion and frustration into the broader environment.

**4** **When you feel compelled to mislead your employees by hiding bad news.**

**5** **When your primary emotion is anger.** If you find yourself navigating your days with a growing sense of anger and frustration with everyone and everything around you, watch out.

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## **An Ounce of Self-Reflection is Worth a Pound of Cure:**

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If we ignore the symptoms that tell us something is wrong with our bodies, we jeopardize our long-term health and even survival. The same goes for a leader who ignores the warning signs outlined above.

It's difficult to get honest feedback when you're in charge. While I encourage you to ask and survey others about your performance, the person looking back at you in the mirror is the last line of defense against a meltdown.

I've coached a number of senior leaders and executives back from the brink by helping them introduce a daily period of personal reflection on their performance and their impact on others. Take the time to reflect upon your performance and strive to improve the next day.

It's easy for stressful circumstances to send a leader's attitude careening towards the rocks. While it's great to believe you have people who will tell you you're acting like a jerk, you cannot count on it.

Instead, build in the discipline and presence of mind to review your own performance daily and identify those activities and behaviors that must be strengthened or eliminated. While you need feedback to grow, you're your own last line of defense against disaster.

# LEADERSHIP GRIT

**Grit** is a good word. It's an even better leadership trait.

**You know what grit is when you see it.** It's that grind-it-out kind of sticktoitiveness in the face of adversity displayed by individuals long on character and short on "I can't."

**Grit** is my mother facing her cancer with courage and resolve.

**Grit** is my father's unceasing help with my mother until the disease prevailed.

**Grit** is the father-in-law I lost earlier this year, who spent a few years sleeping in a freezing tent while getting shot at in Korea sixty years ago.

**Grit** is my father, climbing from one rung below low man at his company and retiring 42 years later as the firm's president. Everything I know about grit I learned from him.

**Grit** is the teacher who sticks to it because she knows that there's one or more in every class that may change the world for the better.



**Grit** is every active duty serviceman or woman and every veteran I've ever met.

**Grit** is the management team who stared down being relegated to the ash heap of corporate history by investing it all on a vision during a period of economic upheaval. It worked and 400 families won.

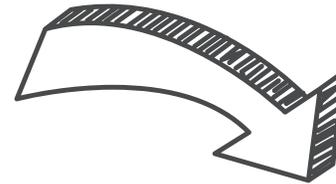
**Grit** is every manager who's ever backed an underdog because she saw something in this person and she invested her care and capital in the individual.

**Grit** is every leader who recognizes that it's his/her job to serve, not to dictate. It takes courage to be humble.

**Grit** is every entrepreneur who ignored Conventional Wisdom to pursue a dream. I wish this character, Conventional Wisdom, would go away.

**Grit** is the leader who in times of adversity shoulders the burden and refuses to quit and refuses to let her people quit. Remember, individuals with grit are short on "I can't."

**Grit. Show some.**



## **ACTION PROMPTER:**

Ask yourself: What new skills have I developed in the last year? If the answer is none, **it's time to invest in yourself.**

# THINK BIGGER

I confess to having cultivated a strong affinity for Big Thinkers. The flip-side is my creeping impatience and dismissal of small thinkers. Given the scale and scope of the challenges in our world and in our industries and firms, small thinkers are a drag on the drive to change.

Big Thinkers see unlimited opportunities presented over a stream of endless tomorrows. They are unencumbered by the shackles of the status quo and the narrowness of their own experience.

In prior generations, the Big Thinkers would have been arctic or sea-faring explorers or inventors challenging the boundaries of dogma and human experience. In our time, they're the ones found rethinking everything in a world where the pace of technological change enables everything to be rethought. They're app developers solutions architects and entrepreneurs and researchers and the business professionals stomping all over the philosophy of: "But we've always done it this way."

The Big Thinkers I admire revel in the view to the future while promoting actions in the here and now. They are Big Thinkers and Big Doers.



## Consider:

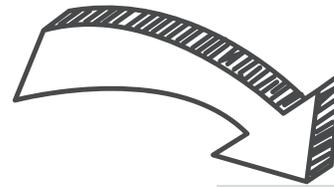
There's the sales manager who sees the market declining over the next few years and immediately begins building an all new (to the firm) approach that will open up new customer segments.

There's the engineer who takes on the de-facto industry standard technology for high value applications with a radically different and dramatically less expensive approach. But it wasn't just the technology, it was the established dogma and the ecosystem surrounding the old technology that had to change. He won the market.

There's the senior manager who tires of the price and feature battles with competitors and reinvents the firm as a systems integrator. When he presented the idea to his Board, they laughed. They're not laughing now--they're too busy helping govern a growing firm.

And there's the customer service manager who grew tired of what she describe as, "managing reduced expectations," and built a team that rethought what it really meant to "serve customers." She changed the fate of the firm in the process.

In each of the examples, these Big Thinkers stared down complacency, overcame the powerful gravitational pull of the status quo and convinced others to try something new and different and even frightening. They looked up from their desks, pushed their view beyond the one from the conference room window and embraced the philosophy of: "What If? and Why Not?"



### **ACTION PROMPTER:**

Talk to your team about how their goals and roles fit into the bigger picture of your firm's strategies and goals.

# THE POWER OF SIMPLE GESTURES

There's the factory manager who walked around the plant every morning greeting co-workers by name in his non-native language.

And the CEO who visited the production facilities in a foreign country twice in one year. During his second trip, he walked around the office and factory and greeted the 40 employees by name. He's still a legend in that facility.

In my own case, it was the senior executive who would meet with me once a quarter over an early breakfast at Bob Evans near the office. I was three years removed from college and his care and feeding of my enthusiasm for my work and his support of my education and development set an early example for me. I've tried to repay his gift to me by mentoring others for the past three decades.



It's the manager who took a chance and hired or promoted you into a role that you were arguably too inexperienced to occupy. Chances are you moved mountains to repay this belief in you.

There was the manager who when learning of a spouse's medical challenges, provided extraordinary schedule flexibility. In a true act of selflessness, he picked up the slack himself instead of distributing the burden across other team members.

Another manager, concerned over how hard she was pushing her team, sent gift cards for weekend getaways to the spouses/significant others. She understood the critical importance of our support network and she went to the source.

There was the airline flight attendant who learned of an individual flying home after his retirement party. She gathered some quick facts and made an announcement to the entire plane. The applause brought tears to the new retiree's eyes.

And while airlines get a bad rap, there was the pilot who personally briefed the passengers every twenty minutes on the progress of mechanical repairs. As lunchtime approached, he grabbed a few crew members and purchased sandwiches in the terminal for the entire plane.

There's every manager who takes the time to listen and observe and then coach an employee. This shouldn't be the exception in our world, but sadly, it appears to be the case. These managers are worth their weight in platinum.

There are literally dozens of opportunities every day for you to make a difference. From the fundamental act of paying focused attention to a coworker, to offering a personal morning greeting or engaging in the acts of management such as:

providing encouragement or delivering respectful, constructive feedback, these simple gestures have a big impact on the people and environment.



# KNOCK DOWN OBSTACLES

Bad managers and lousy leaders spend most of their time enforcing the rules. Effective leaders and the managers you and I want to work for seek out the rules and conventions blocking progress and knock them down—sometimes with finesse and sometimes with brute force.

How courageous are you? While you might not hold the power needed to transform your organization’s approaches wholesale, most revolutions start with a single shot.

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## 5 Starter Ideas to Help You Initiate a Positive Revolution:

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**1** Pay attention and learn about the “administrative and process overhead” slowing your team members down in their pursuits. Ask and observe. Take on some of the compliance and process burden yourself and develop a body of evidence that will support your cry to adapt processes and strike out rules that effectively are shooting your firm in both feet.

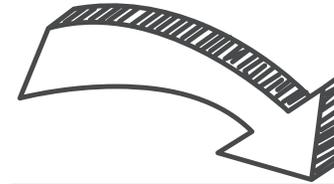


**2 Keep it positive.** While your gut may tell you to rail at the dumb-a@@ rules, your brain should take control and help you propose positive change designed to enable faster response to customers and improved organizational results

**3 Seek first to understand intentions.** Always assess what it is that the rules and bureaucrats are striving to prevent or protect. Good negotiators and great salespeople understand the interests of their opponents or prospects and strive to meet those interests, but in unique ways.

**4 Build coalitions to drive broader change.** Operating as a solo mercenary is interesting and exciting, but building a coalition to promote change is the key to an effective internal revolution against the tyranny of anachronistic rules and processes.

**5 Know your role.** Remember that you are the shield—the last wall of defense between your team members and the misguided efforts of the process imposers and rule-makers. Live this role daily. Just make certain your team produces or, you will be overrun.



## ACTION PROMPTER:

**Schedule one-on-one meetings with your team members.** Keep the agenda simple: What's working? What's not? What do you need me to do to help you?

# LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM DANGEROUS SITUATIONS

As part of my preparation for a recent program, I spent a good deal of time catching up on the leadership studies and stories from dangerous settings. Sadly, we have all too much recent data on this topic, mostly beginning with the reporting of the heroics of the law and fire officials during 9/11 and certainly from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The studies showcase consistent behaviors that define effective leadership in dangerous settings, including:

- **Caring at a personal level**
- **Credibility earned by backing words with actions**
- **Competence displayed...physically and cognitively, particularly via decision-making**
- **Trust given**
- **Purpose front and center**
- **Accountability uniformly and fairly enforced**

The consistent display of these behaviors contributes to forming a working environment that transcends the physical setting. For all of us operating in the relative safety of corporate walls, there's more than a few powerful lessons on leading we can gain from those operating in harm's way. The first lesson is humility.

Effective leaders create the environment for success regardless of physical surroundings.

Their behaviors transcend the dangers, and the tough circumstances create the bonds that build trust and loyalty and promote performance. If you're looking for a leadership example to model your own behaviors, perhaps it's time to look to those leading in harm's way for a meaningful example.

# BECOMING AGILE AND ADAPTABLE IS THE ISSUE

What if everything that used to work for your business no longer did?

The business challenge of this era for long established firms is much about escaping the powerful gravitational pull of the past. When approaches and strategies that worked so well for so long are rendered impotent by shifting technologies and new forms of competition armed with different business models, it's time to change.

For many firms and leaders, this is a pivotal moment. Get it right and the firm and employees live to fight another day. Misfire, and you learn



all-too-quickly that this global environment of change has no conscience as it swallows your firm and your career.

Adaptability is key, yet many leaders struggle to understand what to do to create it. Their words say “speed and agility,” but their measurements and compensation systems scream “efficiency.”

Success in building the adaptable organization is the obligation, responsibility and requirement of the firm’s leadership. It is the fundamental challenge we face in our careers, yet, too many in leadership roles sit in wide-eyed wonder as the world changes and their business decays, decrying the failure of the team to adapt. They fiddle while their businesses burn.

Success with this difficult dilemma requires senior managers to re-think their points-of-view on everything, with emphasis on the role of the leader, the development of true teams and their viewpoint on navigating uncertainty and risk.

The nature of leadership hasn’t fundamentally changed, but the focus has and must. Today’s leader exists to bring the team to life and to allow team members to become their best. This leader serves more than commands.

Instead of yesterday’s preoccupation with efficiency, **adaptability must be the new mantra.**

Learning to leverage new technologies as weapons in business, is essential. Enabling groups to sense and respond and to learn and refine on the road to success is the work of today’s leader at any level. It’s all about adaptability.

Risk and uncertainty are permanent guests at our business party. Instead of resorting to the status quo in the face of uncertainty, there’s a need to run at the unknown and figure it out as you learn. Risk isn’t something to be avoided at all costs, but something to be accepted as part of the process of learning to adapt.

While we are bombarded daily with facts about the obvious—that things are different today in our world—we’re stubborn in our willingness to let go of dated thinking and obsolete approaches to leading and managing.

It’s time for all of us to re-think how to reapply the tools of management and leadership to a world that isn’t going to revert to what used to work.

# SIX KEY DECISION AREAS THAT SHAPE YOU AS A LEADER

There are a number of decisions in every leader's life that stand head and shoulders above all others. These are the decisions that change the trajectory of people, teams and organizations and on a bigger stage, nations. As you navigate your career and your growth as a leader, be prepared to stand up and be counted on these challenging issues:

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## 6 Key Decision-Areas that Shape You as a Leader:

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**1 “We’ll Go” decisions.** In World War II, General Eisenhower faced a split vote of his senior advisors and a weather forecast that was anything but agreeable leading up to the fateful moment to commit nations and the lives of many to the invasion on D-Day.

While our business choices pale in comparison to the commitment of lives that Eisenhower faced, we are accountable for the fortunes of the people who have committed themselves to our cause. All senior managers face critical, challenging strategic choices and the corresponding commitment of funds, talents and resources at the expense of other opportunities. The choices of what to do and what not to do are always surrounded by foggy weather and uncertain outcomes, and yet, you have to make a call.

**2 Who to Grow and How to Support Their Growth issues.** The talent you invest in developing and the professionals you acquire in the marketplace play a huge role in your and your firm's success or failure. Developing others is more than the pursuit of checkbox compliance.

**3 Trust Decisions.** Real leadership involves letting go and trusting others to apply their skills to solving complex problems that you are accountable for. There's no more frightening moment in time for some than the moment when they take their hands off the wheel and let someone else steer. It's counter-intuitive to our common sense and even our survival skills and in many circumstances, it's the absolute right thing to do.

**4 Navigating Successfully through the Gray Zones.** Ethical and values calls have an annoying habit of appearing gray. You'll be challenged over and over again during your career to cut through the gray and assert a black or white call. Head in the wrong direction away from goodness and you'll struggle to return. Sadly, many of the right calls will potentially involve going against the grain of prevailing opinions on your team and with your peer group. Courage is required to navigate these treacherous waters!

**5 Deciding What Kind of a Leader to Be and Then Working At It.** Too often, people in senior roles allow circumstances to determine their leadership styles and approaches. The pursuit of the urgent and the demands of the political environment exert pressure on how we conduct ourselves. I run an exercise in many of my leadership workshops where I ask individuals to project themselves forward to their retirement parties and to eavesdrop in on what people are saying about them as a leader.

As you might imagine, the conversations are always “noble and gratifying.” Many who run through this recognize the contrast between what they want to be known for versus how they are conducting themselves. The realization that each of us are responsible for our own legacy is profound for some.

**6 Learning to Accept and See Your Own Blind Spots.** We all have to make a decision to see ourselves as fallible humans with shortcomings or, to fall victim to delusional thinking about our own capabilities. Many who climb the managerial ladder fall victim to the latter. We all face a decision on our view to ourselves, and this decision has a powerful impact on how we conduct ourselves as leaders.

The transactional and managerial decisions that fill our days are important, but they aren't the decisions and issues that challenge us to be move towards effective or even great. Those are reserved for the topics of people and strategy and for our personal calls on growth, values and ethics.

Admission to the role of true leader involves staring down and navigating these issues without blinking. And yes, you will fail and flail from time-to-time. Welcome to leadership.

# WHY SHOULD ANYONE TRUST YOU TO LEAD?

Seriously, why is it that someone or some group should trust you to lead?

Because of your title? Hardly. The most fleeting of all sources of a leader's power is title. Sure, it confers authority, but leaders who depend solely upon authority as their source of power are effectively bankrupt. They may provoke grudging compliance, but they fail to inspire people to work at their creative best.

Because of your experience? Not really. People operate in the present with eyes on the future. Your past is some dusty old story that no one but you can relate to.

**The real currency of a leader is trust conferred due to credibility earned.**



I've encountered more than a few people in leadership roles over time who neglected to understand the hard work and personal commitment required to earn credibility in the eyes of their team members.

When Rich and I wrote Practical Lessons in Leadership, the issue of credibility was ever-present when interviewing people on what makes an effective leader.

In subsequent years working with thousands of professionals in workshops, courses and programs, the message is the same: trust is earned and the personal credibility of the leader is the gold standard required for us to give our trust to someone in a leadership role.



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## Five Big Credibility Killers:

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**1 Micromanaging.** This destructive, suffocating tactic showcases your insecurities and announces for all of the world to see that you don't trust people.

**2 Saying one thing and doing another.** When the "do of the leader doesn't match the tell," credibility is thrown out the window.

**3 Leading with double-standards.** There is no ambiguity around the concept of accountability, but when you create multiple sets of rules, you shove accountability right out the door.

**4 Putting yourself ahead of everyone else.** We all see it and it is reprehensible. Leaders eat last.

**5 Ignoring the needs of your team members for feedback and professional development support.** Almost universally, people want to grow professionally, improve and chase aspirations. Ignore these needs and you are effectively devaluing people as professionals and as individuals who care.

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## Five Big Credibility Builders:

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**1 Giving trust first.** Instead of requiring your team members to earn your trust, treating people as if they are capable and trustworthy takes courage, but the payment in return is appreciation and mutual trust. Give us the room we need to make mistakes, to learn and ultimately to succeed, and we'll repay your trust in kind.

**2 Standing for something and living up to it.** Values, principles, whatever you want to label them, people want to know what you stand for and they want you to prove it. Accountability starts at home and spreads across the team.

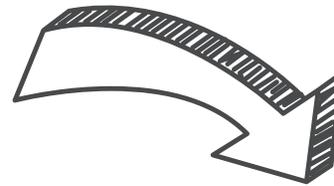
**3 Placing the team before self.** Show us that you're working hard to help us succeed and we'll reward you in kind with our commitment to your success.

**4 Having the courage to help the team.** Your frank feedback and your support for our growth show us that you are worthy of our trust and commitment. And there are few acts that will engender loyalty more than helping us reach towards our goals.

**5 Having the courage to protect the teams.** There are a good number of reasons why it's not in your best interest to stand strong in the face of adversity. Show that we come first and that you're willing to take a corporate bullet for us and we'll follow you anywhere.

The words on what makes a leader credible change from session to session, but the themes remain the same. Selflessness, serving, holding yourself and the rest of us accountable for our actions and performance and helping us grow as professionals, are all essential behaviors for any leader aspiring to be credible in the eyes of the team.

**So now, why should your team trust YOU to lead?**



### **ACTION PROMPTER:**

The truth is in the field: invite a salesperson to your next team meeting and ask them to share what they are observing from customers and competitors.

# IN PRAISE OF LEADERSHIP MISTAKES MADE FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

The true test of your leadership character isn't measured by the absence of mistakes, but rather by the mistakes made in pursuit of growth and learning AND how you conduct yourself once you've made a mistake.

Show me a mistake-free leader, and I'll show you someone hiding from the real issues confronting the business: people and strategy.



**People:**

People are complicated. In spite of the myriad of assessment tools at our disposal, selection is still a judgment call with all of the inherent risks and biases of human decision-making. And the challenge of aligning skills and experiences with tasks while searching for that spark that stimulates people to work at their creative best is truly much more art than science.

You will make mistakes on people. Make them for the right reasons. Taking a chance on good people for the right reasons is worth the risk every day.

Remember, character always gets a positive vote. Assess character carefully. Look for behavioral examples around values, and if the view is dissonant, it's a non-starter.

Passion and desire are powerful reasons to take a chance on someone, even if others around you suggest this person isn't right for a role. Taking chances on people who show that extra spark is part of the essence of leadership. Much like character, you cannot teach passion, you can only help it emerge.

The greatest rewards I've enjoyed as a leader come from those people I selected against popular wisdom because I saw something. Of course, "something" is hard to codify and I've been wrong here as well. It doesn't mean I will stop taking chances.

**Strategy:**

Much like the challenge of selecting and inspiring people to apply their talents, strategy is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty. Choosing what to do and importantly, what not to do is a core management task, yet human judgment in all its brilliance and all of its flaws is once again at the center of strategic decision-making.

Even in our data-driven world, selecting and then executing a strategy is like walking through a minefield on a fresh lava-flow blindfolded. There's a high probability that somewhere between choice of path and the journey down that path, you will misstep with painful results. Assuming the essence of the strategy is sound, often, you can recover, adapt and proceed from execution missteps. These non-fatal errors are powerful learning experiences, teaching you and everyone around you how to spot gaps, fill in blind-spots and redouble efforts to get execution right.

The best leaders I've worked around understand the need for the missteps. No one actively seeks them out, but they are an inevitable part of the pursuit of success.

The least interesting professionals to me are those who cannot articulate a litany of mistakes on their way to their successes. The absence of mistakes...or, the unwillingness to admit prior mistakes is a character flaw and as mentioned above, there are no compromises when it comes to character. There's no guarantee that some of your own mistakes won't have painful consequences. Nonetheless, the mistakes made for the right reasons...in favor of great people and in pursuit of business success, are simply tickets to admission. Pay the price, take your lumps, learn and keep moving.

# AVOID BECOMING PART OF THE DRAMA

Let's face it, some people thrive on bringing their personal challenges into the workplace and baring them all for the world to see. These drama kings and queens seem to revel in sharing their own misery with us in a seemingly never-ending series of scenes from the worst tragic Broadway or faux-Shakesperian play ever.

As distracting and annoying as these people and their gray clouds of doom and dust become, it's all too easy for the manager to get caught up in these serial soap operas, excusing poor performance or spotty attendance due to the nightmarish circumstances of the latest tragedy, illness, divorce, break-up, melt-down or (insert one you've heard before).



In the section entitled, “The Top Ten Challenges of New Leaders” in our book, Practical Lessons in Leadership, Rich Petro and I served up at number 3, “The personal problems of your associates will become your problems if you let them (and sometimes you can’t help it). It was #3, not #10 for a reason.

Playing the role of counselor or headshrinker without a license is like driving blindfolded down the freeway on the way to work. You’re going to crash.

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## 4 Ideas to Help You Avoid Becoming Part of the Drama:

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**1 Get to know your team members.** They aren’t autom-  
atons, human capital or pieces of equipment. They are human beings. Show interest in their work and their lives. Ask questions about the pictures on their desk. If hobbies or weekend activities come up in casual discussion, it’s nice to show interest. It’s better yet if you share interests and can easily share experiences or ideas. While some managers strive to avoid any connection or even understanding of people’s lives outside of work, it’s not necessary to put up false

walls. Effective leaders understand that people feel respected and appreciated when the boss views them as humans with lives inside and outside of the workplace.

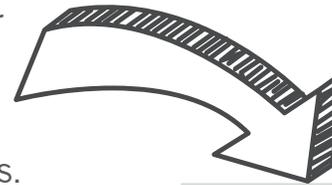
**2 Know that empathy and appropriate support are always in style.** If you learn of a challenging situation with one of your team members, it is better to acknowledge your concern and caring and offer the right kind of support rather than ignore the situation. The right kind of support includes extending schedule flexibility or, encouraging the individual to take time-off as needed to deal with the challenge. Life happens and people need a break. However, if someone requires a never-ending stream of breaks, you’ve got a bigger problem on your hands.

**3 Resist the urge to play counselor.** It’s often tempting for managers to play armchair counselor or psychiatrist, but almost all of us lack the requisite training for these roles. Additionally, our companies are paying us to lead, motivate, inspire and perform, however, no organization wants us serving as headshrinker to the personal challenges of our team members. When approached with the problem, display concern and encourage the individual to gain the right type of help and expertise for the situation outside of work. Resist being drawn into the drama.

**4 Know that conscientious listening can quickly turn into active enabling for those workplace tragedians who would prey on our good intentions.** In my case, I only had to play the part of the enabling manager once, investing what seemed like hundreds of hours and countless performance exceptions for a talented but seemingly troubled employee before I learned my lesson. The problems and our counseling sessions became the focus of our workplace relationship, with me convinced that if I could help this talented but troubled individual, I would make the team and firm stronger. In reality, I simply funded a chronic problem and created a whole host of new challenges. Listen, show genuine interest, but don't get sucked into the drama.

You're there to help, and yes, you're there to develop others, however, your rights and obligations end at the line where personal problems begin. You are neither confessor or counselor, and you can't allow yourself to be sucked into the drama that swirls like a storm around some people.

The best thing you can do for yourself, your team and your firm is to offer empathy and flexibility with-in reason, however even this has a limit. Cross this limit at your own peril.



### **ACTION PROMPTER:**

Take your team on a field trip to observe a completely different business operation. When you return, run a debrief meeting focusing on connecting observations to ideas to improve in your organization.

# LEADING AND SUPPORTING THE GIFTED

Let's face it, some people are graced with an extra gear that the rest of us don't have. Whether it's remarkable creativity or ingenuity, or incredible technical skills, it's exciting to manage and support extraordinary individuals.

It's also very challenging.

Good managers and leaders tailor their approach for individuals, however, when presented with someone who is light-years beyond their peers in certain areas, many managers stumble and struggle when it comes to daily management and on-going support and development.



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## 4 Suggestions for Managing and Developing the Gifted Individuals on Your Team:

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**1 Remember, you cannot compromise your standards for accountability and fairness.** Standards of accountability and fairness must be universal, however, when it comes to supporting development and leveraging the skills of those uniquely gifted, don't feel compelled to hold these people back. A superstar needs role players to win a championship. Nonetheless, in the eyes of your extended team, the accountabilities must be equal.

**2 Beware Enabling the Brilliant Problem-Employee Syndrome.** Closely related to the first point on accountability, I've viewed many individuals gifted with technical or creative skills who clearly were deficient in the emotional and social intelligence areas. (No intent to generalize here...just to describe personal examples.)

If you encounter one of these challenging characters, be careful not to rationalize or excuse aberrant behavior with something that sounds like, "That's just Joe. He's brilliant, but he

struggles to participate in groups without running all over people." I actually lived this and my own rationalization of the behavior hurt the team and my credibility as a manager. In the end, it hurt the brilliant individual as well. Take action, provide coaching, training and ample heaping helpings of feedback, and put some teeth into the accountability for acceptable behaviors.

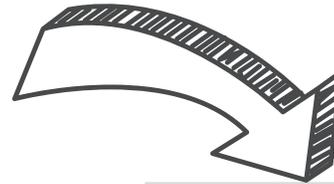
**3 Carefully Tailor Professional Development to the Individual.** While this is a good management practice for everyone on your team, it's particularly important to customize the education and developmental opportunities for your gifted team members.

Challenge yourself to identify opportunities for this individual to engage with and learn from the leaders in their field. Encourage them to join and actively participate in relevant industry or professional organizations. And instead of reflexively exposing them to the mostly cookie-cutter training offerings provide via HR, provide something unique. In the past, I've sent strategists to Harvard to learn from Clay Christensen, engineers to MIT, marketers to Kellogg and emerging leaders to The Center for Creative Leadership. The results were priceless and the costs trivial compared to the returns these people generated.

**4 Ramp up and Amp up the Internal Challenges.** I love the idea of applying Ram Charan’s perspective on developing senior leaders: expose them to a series of increasingly ambiguous challenges as part of the learning, developing and testing process.

For those great people I’ve managed who have exhibited that extra skills gear, I’ve learned that it’s easy to bore them into depression with mundane tasks and alternatively, it’s easy to lose them to the pursuit of explaining the unifying theory of everything. Instead of holding back or completely letting go, develop together with the individual a series of deliberate projects that grow increasingly challenging and ambiguous. Provide coaching and feedback and when you encounter performance areas that create problems for the individual, add-in developmental support.

People are our business as leaders and managers, and they make this work remarkably challenging and incredibly rewarding. Supporting the daily work and on-going development of a gifted professional is in some ways much more difficult than dealing with poor performers. It takes balancing the need for equity across your team with the very real need to feed what is often a tremendous hunger to do more, learn more and experience more. Your challenge is to create the environment and pacing to make this work for all involved.



### **ACTION PROMPTER:**

Starting today, begin replacing statements and directives with questions. Quit telling and start asking. Your team members will thank you and morale and performance will go up.

# DEVELOPING THE CONFIDENCE TO ACT

For leaders at all levels, there's much to gain from James D. Murphy's excellent book, *Courage to Execute: What Elite U.S. Military Units Can Teach Business About Leadership and Team Performance*.

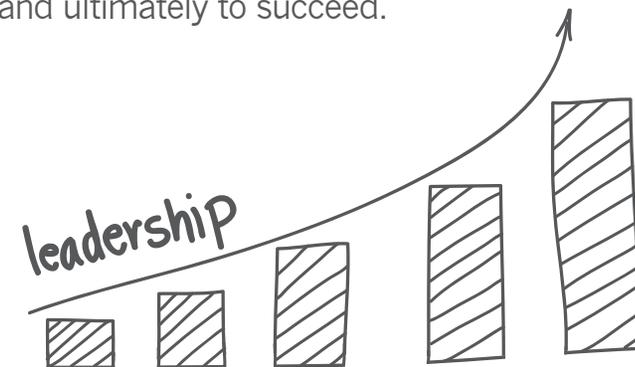
In particular, Mr. Murphy's emphasis on helping us understand the hard, deliberate and very structured work that goes into training and cultivating a team of professionals who are committed to the mission and who trust each other with their lives, is worth the price of admission. (As a side-note, it is hard to not read this book and recognize how far we fall short of

when it comes to ensuring the training and development necessary for high performance in our organizations.)

Of the many quotable and thought-provoking items in the book, one that jumps out at me is Mr. Murphy's perspective on courage. His words: "...but remember, courage is not bravado. Courage is the confidence to act that comes from preparation."

It's the lack of confidence to act that I observe as a derailment factor for so many teams from senior levels to functional or project groups. From decisions on strategy (what to do/what not to do?) to approach (how?) to key talent issues (who's on/who's off?) to structural, and accountability issues, the lack of proper preparation results in leaders and teams flailing, floundering, bickering or, simply staring at the headlights on key issues.

Effective leaders recognize their role in preparing teams to act, to learn and ultimately to succeed.



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## 5 Things You Can Do with Your Team to Cultivate the Confidence to Act:

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**1 Strive for crystal clarity for the mission.** Whether you are leading the senior management team as CEO or leading a project team, the mission and parameters must be crystal clear. The fuzzy nature of most strategies and the inability of individuals and their work groups to clearly connect their priorities and deliverables to the pursuit of mission objectives is deadly. You cannot over-communicate and you cannot over invest in clarifying the mission to the point of common understanding on your team. Strive to reduce the lofty picture goals to a size that is digestible and actionable at the level of your team.

**2 Distill the mission down to navigable, actionable size for your team and be certain that people can talk about it clearly.** Knowing the goal is to win the war or move to a new market is one thing, but understanding your role and your team's role in this goal is essential.

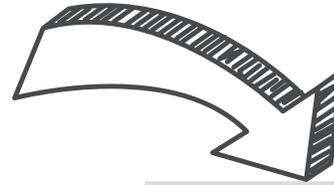
**3 Teach your team to talk.** The collegial talk between most group members on teams is poison for performance. It feels good because it's non-threatening, however, it skirts the real issues of execution and accountability. Learning to trust each other enough to tackle the hard topics of mission clarity, roles, performance and accountability, is not something that comes easy for any group. It's also essential for high performance.



**4 Teach and constantly strive to strengthen decision-making processes and decision quality.** Decisions are the precursors to actions for individuals and organizations. Without a decision, nothing happens or nothing changes. Effective leaders help team members learn how to frame issues, evaluate options, assess risks and then decide. They also teach their team members to review the outcomes of their decisions in pursuit of learning and improvement.

**5 Know that team development is an every day activity and pursue it vigorously.** Successful teams are made through the careful and deliberate work of the team leader. From mission clarity to member selection to promoting core values for performance and accountability, team development is THE purpose of the leader.

Achieving the confidence to act is an outcome of the hard work of team building. Clarity for the mission, confidence and trust between team members and the ability to talk through and evaluate different options and scenarios and then decide, are all key factors. None of these occur naturally in the workplace. **How hard are you working at cultivating the courage to act on your team?**



### **ACTION PROMPTER:**

Ask yourself: “At the end of my time working with this team, what will they say that I did?” If you don’t have good answers, it’s time to step up your game.

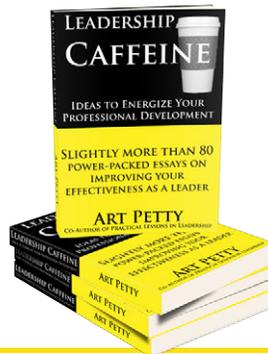
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If you enjoyed this, you'll love the book, [Leadership Caffeine](#), with content arranged in sections on leading and motivating teams, developing yourself, navigating challenging days and much more.



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