

LEADING FROM THE HEART

BY WES FRIESEN

Experience and evidence show that the most effective leaders have learned how to lead from their hearts. Heart leaders are great at making people feel special, giving them a sense of purpose and making them feel appreciated for who they are and what they do. Leading from the heart is consistent with the servant leader philosophy that results in positive relationships and better results. Leading from the head by getting tasks done via planning, organizing systems and processes, and holding people accountable is needed. But for maximum results, we need to follow the John Maxwell advice that we “go to touch a heart before asking for a hand.”

How Can We Lead from Our Hearts?

I appreciate this quote from Chick-fil-A CEO Mark Miller, “The heart is a muscle, and you strengthen muscles by using them. The more I lead with my heart, the stronger it gets.” So, how do we strengthen our heart muscle and lead well from it? Here are 10 practical ideas to consider:

1. Show People That You Care About Them.

People don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care. If we treat people as a means to an end, we’ll never have their loyalty. Instead, we can show people we care by being sensitive to their interests, wishes, needs, and challenges and getting to know them personally. We can make time for people and demonstrate support when “life happens” — including sickness for employees or their loved ones, doctor appointments, and other sources of stress. We can encourage people by

saying kind words; sending cards, notes, texts, and emails; and being flexible with work schedules and allowing people time off when needed. I would suggest that, in a nutshell, showing people we care is about consistently practicing the Golden Rule: proactively treating people positively like we would like to be.

2. Put People First. As leaders, we are ultimately paid to get things done (results). But *how* we get results is important, and prioritizing people and treating them well will help us get better results in the short term and the long term. Putting people first includes recognizing and appreciating their efforts. Recent research by Globoforce found 78% of workers said they would work harder if their efforts were better recognized and appreciated. And when we put people first we reap what we sow. Entrepreneur and CEO Mary Kay Ash built her business around the concept of putting people first. She wrote, “We treat our people like royalty. If you honor and serve the people that work for you, they will honor and serve you.”

3. Be More Empathetic. One survey found that the number-one characteristic that people wanted in their manager was empathy. In order to develop our empathy, we need to learn to listen, understand, and respect others’ points of view instead of forcing our own perspective on them every time. Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once advised, “To be kind is more important than to be right. Many times, what people need is not a brilliant mind that speaks but a special heart that listens.”

4. Communicate Carefully. Our verbal and written words can either build people up or tear them down. I aspire to follow the advice of Saint Paul who wrote, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29). Our words count, but so does our non-verbal communication. We can show support by our nods, smiles, and appropriate touching (e.g., fist bumps, high fives). Speaking of smiles — I like this quote from author Anthony J. D’Angelo, “Smile, it is the key that fits the lock of everybody’s heart.”

5. Focus on the Positives. The reality is that we all make mistakes. Instead of punishing mistakes, we can take the opportunity to turn them into learning and growth opportunities. We can also look for opportunities to praise people when they do well. Noted leadership and management guru Ken Blanchard has been writing, speaking, and consulting for 50 years. He was recently asked what the single most important lesson was that he has learned to help managers and their teams be successful. His answer? Catch people doing something right and then thank them and express appreciation. Another idea is to strive to consistently give people our BEST. BEST is an acronym where B = Believe in people, E = Empower them, S = Support them, and T = Trust them. When we give people our BEST, that will bring out the best in them.

6. Be Transparent and Authentic. We need to model being transparent and authentic. This includes owning our mistakes and being vulnerable and admitting our weaknesses and when we are struggling. Setting this kind of an example creates a healthy environment of psychological safety for our teams. Popular speaker and writer Brené Brown admonishes, “Vulnerability is not weakness. And that myth is profoundly dangerous.”

We can also include some appropriate sharing about our personal lives so people get to know us as fellow human beings with families and with interests outside work. It is also important to walk our talk and set a positive example of integrity and follow through on commitments.

7. Insist on Work-Life Balance. In the past, employers and bosses often demanded that employees work consistently long hours and sacrifice personal and family time. Those days are largely over as Millennials and Generation Z workers value a work-life balance and are willing to leave organizations if a respect for balance is not present. Evidence shows that helping workers have a balance in their lives on and off the job results in a healthy environment with less stress, higher productivity, and lower employee turnover.

8. Establish Long-Term Relationships. We can choose to make a long-term commitment to building relationships with people. When people know that we value our relationship with them over the long term (not just to get their support in the short run), their trust and partnership with us escalates. Another benefit of building long-term relationships is they can continue after we no longer are teammates — one of my joys is the ongoing friendships and relationships I have with former teammates and students.

9. Have More Fun. Employees who have fun at work are happy, and happy employees are more productive. Research shows that having fun makes us physically and emotionally healthier, elevates endorphins, and reduces diseases and work absences. There are lots of ways to have fun. My teams have gone bowling, played miniature golf, watched movies, had dress up days, played games like Family Feud — the list goes on. Need ideas? Get input from your team members.

10. Embrace Being a Servant Leader. Servant leaders don't lead using traditional "command and control" methods (i.e., I tell you what to do, and with the attitude that you are there to serve me). In contrast, the servant leadership approach is about the leader focusing on serving others and treating people with dignity and respect. Author Sheri Dew speaks to this when she wrote, "True leaders understand that leadership is not about them but those they serve. It is not about exalting themselves but about lifting others up." Leading from the heart

is a key component of what servant leadership is all about.

Closing thought: People yearn for good managers. A recent study found that 56% of employees would turn down a 10% raise to stay with a great manager! Let's be great managers that lead from the heart, and in doing so add value to our team members and the stakeholders we serve. ■

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