

The Accidental Leader – How Most Leaders Develop

I've spent my life studying, teaching, coaching, and reading about leaders. And, to paraphrase Yogi Berra, "You can learn a lot by just watching." In my case, I've learned a lot about how leaders develop. And, sad to say, I've realized that many leaders are like accidental tourists who pass through countries on pre-packaged tours without ever learning another language or finding out what other cultures are really like. They travel through their working lives, tackling new jobs and moving from one company to the next, but never really understanding why and how they lead.

As a result, leaders never reap the full benefit of their experiences at work to understand themselves, deeply and fully, and to forge a style of leadership that is authentic, grounded, explicit, and clear. Like the tourists who never leave the bus, they can only imagine the richness of smells, tastes, and sights they see from a distance.

The best leaders I know are the ones who've reaped the most from their experiences. They have consciously worked to understand themselves more clearly, more deeply, with more objectivity, and with a greater sense of humor and humility.

But the best leaders are few and far between. Most leaders develop their approach to leadership erratically and unconsciously. Let me explain with a few examples.

My first job out of college was as high school teacher in the inner city schools of Rochester, NY. I loved my work, the kids, and I wanted to make a difference. There was only one problem, the assistant principal. His approach to leadership was autocratic, anal, and averse to anything approaching humor, understanding, or trust. After two years, I left to work somewhere else. He drove me from teaching by creating a frustrating, demeaning work environment.

Guess what? I'm not the only person this has happened to. Innumerable people I've worked with over the years have told me similar stories. One attorney I know told me that whenever he has a decision to make, he thinks of his own autocratic/anal former boss and does just the opposite. That's right – he makes decisions by using his former boss as a negative example.

So, what does that mean? It means that one way that leaders develop their leadership style is through negative examples. In and of itself, that's not so bad. It becomes a problem when that strategy is coupled with others.

What else? Another way that leaders develop their leadership style is simply trial and error. They try something and see if it works. If it does, they continue to do it. In general, that's not such a bad idea. However, once you look at it a bit more closely, you begin to see the fault lines.

Just because something works in one place doesn't mean that it will work somewhere else. Just because it works with some subordinates, doesn't mean that it will work with all subordinates. And, just because it works in some circumstances doesn't mean that it will work in every circumstance. But that's what happens most of the time. Many leaders have tried something early in their careers, found that it worked, and thereafter persist in doing it again and again – despite the results.

The problem is not that leaders use trial and error, it's that they don't reflect on or refine their strategies and tactics after the initial success. Leaders, like most of us, are creatures of habit. And, as a result, they continue to reuse approaches they learned early – even when they no longer apply.

There's more. Many of the leaders with whom I've worked are the products of their organizations and the way those organizations do things. That is, they adopt the methods and models their companies employ. They become successful because they have accepted and embraced their organizations operate. That's a good thing – up to a point.

The problem arises when individuals lose their sense of themselves and become a hologram of their leadership style – a virtual representation of what a leader should be but one which, when you try to find the substance in it, disintegrates. Leaders who model themselves exclusively on the organization's idyllic image of a leader fail to maintain the appropriate balance between the organization's expectations and the leader's individual strengths and distinctiveness.

As a result, they become an empty shell of a leader – someone whose style is imposed from the outside and who lacks the internal core of self-knowledge that allows one to lead authentically. The leaders, rather than ground their leadership style in their cores values and beliefs, mimic the style of their organizations. As the old TV ad asked, "Where's the beef?" There is no beef (substance), only filler.

That's not all, of course, there are other things leaders do to lurch toward a leadership style. Many of the leaders I know conscientiously read that latest new books on leadership. They read and discuss the books with colleagues and find ways to apply the lessons to their work. How, you are surely asking, can that be a bad thing?

Actually, it isn't such a bad thing. In fact, it has a lot to offer. Reading and reflection are key disciplines that I've encouraged many of the people with whom I work to employ. So, what's the problem? Why would I say that reading leadership books to improve how one leads is a problem?

The problem is in the books themselves. Unfortunately, far too many of the books, even those I've enjoyed and learned from, fall into a common trap. They claim, either explicitly or subtly, to solve all your problems. Just like the old-time snake oil salesmen who claimed miracle cures to all your ailments, the leadership books entice you into believing that they have the answers to your problems.

I have not read many (if any) leadership books that begin by saying, “Use the ideas here like salt – sprinkle a little on only after you’ve finished cooking and only after tasting the food first. And then, use it sparingly.” Instead, they claim that if you follow their advice, you’ll succeed. Not so. Leaders who accept the claims (explicit or implied) of the authors and blindly embrace the books’ lessons, soon realize that notoriety and good packaging is no substitute for what really works.

One last example. Many of the leaders I know have become quite good a leading. Over time, they’ve developed a distinctive style of leadership that works for them. They know what to do and how to do it. They are regarded, rightfully so, as effective leaders.

So how can that be a problem? It’s a problem because it’s tacit knowledge. What is tacit knowledge? It’s knowledge you have, but cannot put into words. Let me give you another example from my life.

My mother, now a feisty 89-year-old, is a prize-winning pie baker. She developed her skill as a youngster baking pies for the just about every neighborhood get-together, including weddings, birthdays, religious and national holidays, and funerals. Whenever someone in the neighborhood needed a pie, my mother was called upon. She spent most of her free time during grammar and high school baking pies.

When I was first married, I asked my mother to teach me how to bake pies like her, especially how to make her crusts – those flaky, melt-in-your-mouth delicacies that everyone raved about. She patiently sat me down, outlined the ingredients (flour, water, and lard), and said, “It’s easy. Just knead it as little as possible. You’ll know when to stop.” I asked, “How will I know?” Her answer, “It will feel right.”

You know what? I never learned to bake pies like my mother. And that’s because my mother, like many good leaders, has tacit knowledge. She knows what she’s doing, but she can’t put it into words. She developed her skill only after extensive practice until it became second nature. The wisdom was in the tips of her fingers, not her head. She could tell by the touch.

Many of our best leaders have tacit knowledge. They know how to lead, but don’t know why and can’t put it into words. When pushed, they come up with banal explanations like, “Experience taught me that...”, “I realized that some things worked better than others...”, or “I learned from my mistakes...”.

Tacit knowledge is problem because we can’t replicate what good leaders do because they can’t explain it to us. Try, just for a minute, to decide what you will do to be like Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill. Aside from their obvious gifts for language, which they honed through discipline and practice, tell me what you’ll do to lead like them? It’s not easy, and I would argue, it’s not possible, because their ability to lead is both distinctive and tacit. It’s not replicable.

So, what does this all mean? What is the impact of these problems on the development of leaders? These problems combine to create a process for developing leaders that is erratic and unconscious. And that process, in turn, fosters leaders whose styles are incomplete, inconsistent, and all-too-often ineffective.

Is it really that bad? Are there really that many inept leaders? Well, let me ask you. Think of all the leaders you've ever worked for and known about. How many of them do you admire? How many of them would you want to be like? How many of the leaders you know would you trust with making the right decisions for your organization right now? I suspect, that out of all the leaders you know, there is only a handful you would trust and want to emulate.

So, is there any hope of overcoming the dilemma of the accidental leader? There isn't if we continue to allow leaders to lurch along, developing themselves during their careers like accidental tourists. Continuing what we're currently doing will only get us more of the same – leaders who fail to inspire us.

What can be done? I have a few suggestions stemming from my work with those leaders who seemed to have gotten it right? If you're a leader (or aspiring leader), you might want to:

- Find someone to talk to about leadership.

When they say, "It's lonely at the top" they're right. No one is more insulated and isolated than senior executives. The cocoon in which leaders are wrapped, causes them to fall into several traps, among them: believing their own press, thinking they have the answers, and failing to get honest information and candid feedback.

Leaders need to find someone outside of their organization who has the experience and wisdom to be like King Arthur's Merlin and provide objective advice and honest counsel. Leaders need to find someone to whom they can turn when they're uncertain, unclear, or afraid – someone who will be receptive, supportive, honest, and direct.

That advisor should be a sounding-board as the leaders seek to understand themselves more deeply and fully and be able to help them forge a clearer understanding of how and why they lead.

- Subject yourself to public scrutiny.

I've worked with a lot of executives. None-the-less, I'm continuously surprised by how many of them are hypocrites; they hold their subordinates accountable for rigorous performance goals and review them publicly (and often brutally), but they refuse to subject themselves to the same level of public accountability and scrutiny.

There is no better way to undermine credibility and integrity than to expect things of others that you don't expect of yourself. And yet, that is precisely what leaders do. And, I guess I shouldn't be surprised anymore since I see it so frequently. However, that's no excuse.

Leaders must subject themselves to the same level of scrutiny they expect of others. Nothing else is good enough, and nothing else will enable leaders to develop the honesty and humility that is needed to be effective today.

- Rigorously and candidly evaluate yourself and your situation.

Public scrutiny helps. But, there's more. Leaders must thoroughly and objectively analyze themselves in order to understand what they really can accomplish. Many of the leaders I've worked don't understand their unique strengths and how they can leverage those strengths at work. Further, they don't understand or accept their most glaring weaknesses in order to find ways to compensate for them either.

No leaders are good at everything; knowing what you're good at helps you decide what you should (and shouldn't) do. Knowing your weaknesses helps you decide where to turn for help. Having an objective understanding of both strengths and weaknesses makes you a better leader by enabling you to put together a team that leverages everyone's strengths.

Fully understanding what the organization needs is important, too. Some organizations need a visionary who'll drive change, others need someone to mend fences and foster internal coordination, and still others need some to establish common systems and procedures. Knowing what your organization needs and evaluating your ability to provide what is needed, is the first step in determining whether and how you can lead.

- Develop a clear statement of what you stand for and how you lead, tell others about it.

The very best leaders know themselves well enough that they can put into words the things they stand for and the ways that they lead in order to pursue those goals. It's not easy to do because it requires honest feedback, objective analysis, and humility. But the leaders who can do so are better leaders because they have established a compass (built on values) to guide themselves through the tough times.

Of course, having that compass is not enough. Leaders have to put it to use. I've seen leaders whose approach to informing and educating their employees is driven more by a need to control information and to share it. They communicate too little and too late. As a result, the workforce fills in the vacuum left by the leader's silence and, unfortunately, assumes the worst.

Leaders must let others know they stand for and how they lead. When they can do that, leaders reduce the uncertainty and confusion that exists in the minds of their employees. As a result, the employees have more confidence in the hand on the tiller that's steering their ship.

Are these guaranteed solutions to the dilemma of the accidental leader? Of course not. But, if you want to be less of an accidental leader and more of an authentic, thoughtful, and effective leader, these suggestions might just help you do so.