

Balance Both; Coach Habits

To cope with a growing triple threat in business and society, we need more emphasis on aspects of leadership that have so far been overlooked or underrated.

The threats: greater speed, uncertainty and constant change. Business or social organizations have felt these forces overtaking everything we do. As a result we have to think more effectively in momentary slice of time, which can be called “blinks.” Rapid decision-making has never been more needed by more people.

The Internet and other media make more information available and allow it to travel faster than ever. Increasing education means more people doing research and inventing new solutions that lead to even more new information and solutions daily. Just keeping up can be daunting, let alone determining what’s valid to apply in your own situation.

If you fail to move forward, you’re soon left behind. As Jack Welch, highly respected former CEO of GE says, “An organization’s ability to learn and translate that learning into action rapidly is the ultimate competitive advantage.”

Learning necessarily means taking risks of pushing into unknown territory through trial and error... and making mistakes. The unknown and uncertainty are factors shunned by traditional management theory, which prizes consistency and certainty. However, managing uncertainty has always been the domain of leadership and is now the subject of the new science, appropriately called Complexity, fitting our increasingly complex times.

Hannibal crossing the Alps to subdue Rome, Genghis Khan, Mahatma Gandhi and other successful leaders undoubtedly started with considerable confidence, but could not predict with certainty what they would ultimately achieve or how they would get there. Now we know more about how and why they succeeded. Success today means dealing daily with many uncertainties, not trying to sweep them out of sight.

Myths about leadership paint a contradictory picture. We need to separate the components and understand the value of each. The good news is that anyone can lead effectively. It doesn’t require a special personality or “charisma” as some suggest. Command-style leadership is actually a limited version in which orders are to be obeyed rather than one which develops people who can exercise judgment and initiative . While many books praise it, they miss deeper points that help true leaders bring out the best.

To be effective requires consistent application of the same basic principles in every situation. With diligent practice these become a “lifestyle,” but not one anyone is born with complete. Everyone has some of the components and needs practice with others.

Fortunately the components of effectiveness are straight forward. As with all habits or “skills” (same concept), “practice makes perfect.” Leaving out any of the elements increases the likelihood of failure. Using them all together increases the likelihood of success – in other words: it makes our inevitable mistakes along the way luckier, to the point where we can depend on being successful a great deal of the time. Making more,

but luckier mistakes is the essence of effective leadership, whether you lead just yourself and your own life, teams or entire organizations of people.

The key strategy for making luckier mistakes can be summed up in the words: “Balance Both; Coach Habits.” This is shorthand for the human skills for success.

Examples abound, many in the area of ethics or honesty as well as in the four other key areas we’ll identify. Enron is a negative example. Top leaders began to outright lie about sales and revenue projections as if they were facts. They took steps to make their projections appear factual, cheating shareholders and everyone else. Honesty is a key component of leadership, nothing more nothing less. As with the other components, leave it out and the results are disastrous. It mattered not that the CEO was an immensely successful, intelligent, charismatic individual. Other lapses of honesty are equally fatal, but not so obvious. Setting the wrong tone in the way they led, set the stage for lies later.

In his excellent book on the value and components of leadership, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins defines five levels of effectiveness among leaders. At his top “level 5” he puts “humble” leaders as he calls them. Honest might be a better word, taken in its broadest sense. These are people who know the world does not revolve around them. They face reality honestly. They respect and include others in their plans and actions - honestly.

Effective leaders involve others, build effective teams and subordinates, give people appropriate authority and, in general, act more humbly about giving straight orders than the typical “level 4” or “charismatic” leader. Collins points to Lee Iacocca as a typical example of the best a level 4 leader can hope to accomplish. He achieved great things at Chrysler through enormous personal magnetism and contribution. But as soon as he left, the restored “good” company he saved immediately began to struggle again. By contrast the level 5 leaders identified by Collins left behind highly competent, fully functioning teams and successors who went on to ensure the company would continue to be “great” by any definition, not just “good.”

Collins doesn’t claim a level 5 leader would never be charismatic, only that it isn’t an essential ingredient of being extremely successful. Jack Welch is likely one exception to the “humble” label, who nevertheless relied on the sort of actions Collins found mostly among individuals who preferred to be relatively anonymous. One might say, “the exception proves the rule.” Collins saw the same five basic leadership skills we note here, but left the reader hanging when it came to how to develop them.

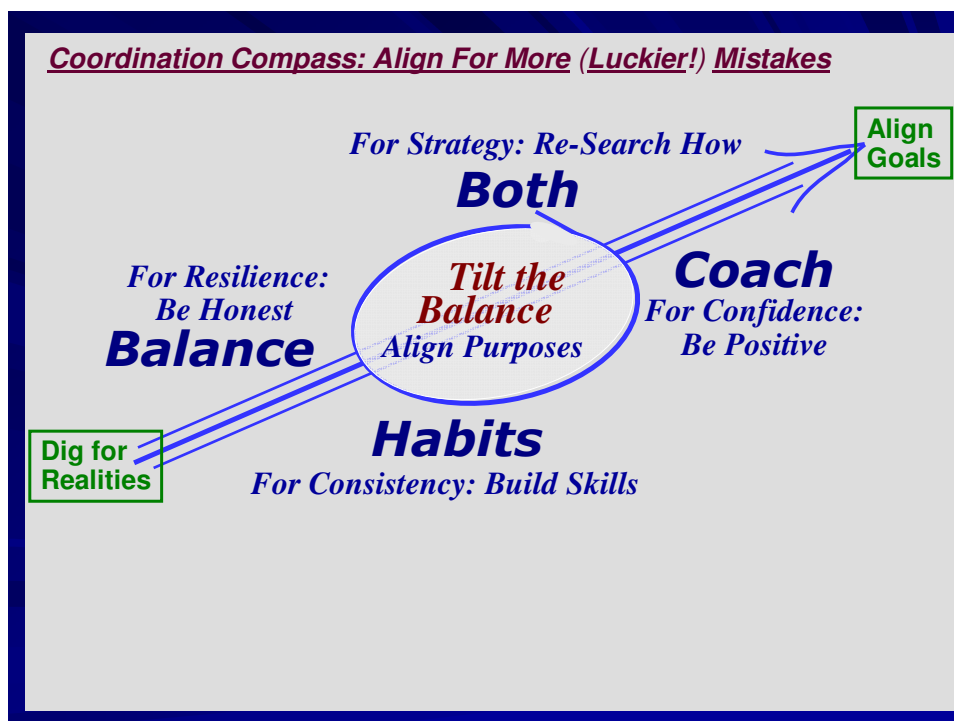
So what are the characteristics, or more properly, the skills an effective leader must exercise? We can look at this in two forms for instant judgment and for longer thoughtful analysis.

First, we need a simple formula to apply that is most likely to be effective instantaneously in every passing situation. The “culture” of an organization is composed of nothing more or less than the accumulated habits of its constituents. Aristotle observed, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” If culture is our accumulated habits, we need to ensure every moment-to-moment action everyone takes

fits the effective model as much as possible in every situation if we are to approach excellence.

Second, at the same time we need a model for analysing situations when we can't immediately see the best action. With the best of intentions our immediate judgment will need some second-guessing at times. Most often we have the time for analysis, but not it takes practice, too. The model below reminds us of ways to look for both approaches.

The shorthand formula is easy, but cryptic: Balance both; coach habits. To explain how this works I slowly evolved a "Coordination Compass" (which I used to call the 'effectiveness compass' in earlier material). Developed from years of coaching, it can be used for analysis of what is missing or being overlooked in a situation. It expands the shorthand formula:



Our objective is always to create luckier results (whether they happen to be lucky mistakes or things we actually planned to achieve). This requires that we coordinate four components by balancing them against each other so none are left out. Note that they're not "in order" as they must occur together. Order can vary from situation to situation and person to person – so in many cases any order is fine. Aligning them together smoothly to build purposeful momentum is the central "fifth skill" or habit:

- Develop a strategy for *how* to achieve your *goals* by looking at "both." You can't ride several horses in different directions at the same time, so it will be essential to align strategies, directions and goals as much as possible into a clear, unified approach. The key here is never to settle for a single obvious goal or strategy for the sake of clarity and speed without looking for "both." Before rushing off in all directions, ask 'what am I missing?' The key is to look for what might seem to contradict or counter-balance your first reaction. Often leaders correctly want a single clear strategy, but

overlook important people or objectives that must be figured in. We say, “save money at all costs,” then find customer satisfaction is dropping dramatically because of corners being cut. We need a way to do both, with neither ignored. This takes creativity, but is essential in the long run. The strategy can’t succeed until we come up with a way to do it. Involving others boosts creativity. We want people to understand that every effective strategy contains such dualities. They must weigh judgments, not blindly follow orders. It can be difficult, but we can coach people to do it effectively. It takes time and effort to find a strategy that achieves “both.” In fact, “both” is a generalization. There will often be more than two ideas to be incorporated in one best strategy, but looking for more than one helps us become aware of what the other factors may be.

- Build everyone’s confidence (including your own) by *coaching* them toward *positive* outcomes and faith in their abilities. Coaching is a straight forward way of improving leadership and management because it inevitably pulls together all the components we need. A good coach asks the person what they want (what they feel *positive* about trying to achieve). Then they help the person question how to achieve it, what’s hindering them and what specific new skills or habits they will need to make progress. Finally, they follow up regularly and repeat this cycle. This puts the problem solution in the hands of the person who must work to achieve the result. Without laying out orders, it maximizes their clarity about why *they* want to do it and the processes *they* must go through to succeed. Building self-sufficiency in others spreads workload and stress as well. Coaching is a tremendously *positive* way to manage and lead.
- Think in terms of building habits (another word for *skills*) since the person must *improve* in order to achieve what are now *their* goals. You can help them brainstorm what those are and how to go about improving. You can set follow up discussions to see how things are going. Slowly, with coaching and reminders (from regular follow ups in which you begin by asking “how’s it going”), they are reminded to make repeated efforts that eventually pay off in new habits/skills formed. This “How’s it going” question becomes a habit for the coach for opening each follow up session.
- Building resilience begins with being brutally honest about all the factual *realities* we can find in our situations. Nothing new and worthwhile is achieved without overcoming hurdles. Learning new habits/skills, finding and testing new strategic directions, even keeping one’s morale and confidence up takes repeated effort. All of us let down and feel a bit hopeless at various points along the way. But facts must include *balance* as well. Facts may seem good or bad. Our evaluation of them may even flip flop. Hurdles can help us redefine strategy or learn valuable lessons for the next tougher challenge. Apparent handicaps can turn out to be blessings because they alert us to pay attention to factors others face and need guidance to overcome. We have to balance “good” with “bad” as we work through both feelings (emotional intelligence and reactions) as well as practical roadblocks we encounter. Each has a solution. As several CEOs have told me, “there’s no such thing as good or bad facts, just facts.” Good or bad are often (though not always) in how we first look at facts. We can’t stop with our first assessments, but we need to look for “both.” And so we come full circle. All the components of leadership are intertwined and interdependent.
- Finally, there is a complex skill of coordinating, balancing and moving forward, keeping all the components moving together to achieve your purposes. The path isn’t

always clear, but our goal is to smooth it out as much as possible. By keeping the components in *balance*, we build momentum in the direction of sustained resilience, problem-solving, habit-building and, importantly, keeping our confidence up. The more we can align all our strategies and coordinate balance, the sooner we build the momentum we need to accelerate past hurdles and therefore the sooner we succeed. Mistakes along the way often become “lucky” stepping stones to greater results than we ever anticipated were possible. There is a “phase shift” when we get things working together that enables breakthrough outcomes. It’s a great, reinforcing feeling that helps you on to even greater achievement in future. I like to characterize the feeling as “*tilting the balance*” forward toward our goals rather than trying to force movement. Every athlete knows the futility of trying to force coordination and excellence... and along with that they know the feeling of being “in the zone” that signals a record-breaking performance may be underway. In Zen, archers are taught to keep their “intention” or *purpose* on the *goal* – the bulls-eye – rather than over-think the actual process of shooting the bow and arrow. Athletes look for a sense that everything is “flowing” just right, that the components they have practiced are all coming together. Happiness theorists now see this sort of “flow” as a hallmark of what also makes humans optimally happy in every sort of activity. It’s no coincidence that it also makes us optimally successful. When you coordinate well enough to begin to go “full tilt” you know you’re on the way to outstanding leadership and individual success. It’s important to take the start-up time to build momentum.

These seemingly simple principles go deep. One can use the Coordination Compass to analyze which components are in difficulty. Entire books have been written on how to improve each skill set. Using the Coordination Compass we can determine whether our need arises from lack of positive confidence, lack of recognizing balance in goals and the other components, lack of consistent habit-building, lack of honest appraisal of realities or ultimately or lack of getting it all together. Whichever is challenging we can improve. For instance, reality can sometimes be the hardest element to get clear about. We depend on feedback from other people whose judgments are personal and subject to error. Even numbers and statistics can mislead. Asking for feedback and keeping alert to all possible forces that affect our progress is a full time need.

Many, many leaders find it more and more difficult to get accurate feedback the higher they rise in rank because no one wants to be the bearer of bad news. Strong leaders regularly ask specifically for evaluations of how they are doing and how the project is going – and they make a point of thanking people who offer problematic information. Any hint that a powerful leader rejects or is annoyed by honest, but problematic input is deadly. Reprisals are worse and any appearance of them must be carefully avoided. Even a perception of any will be fatal. You often have to ask several times in several different ways to get clear information about problems. Any negative response from you while asking for input will surely dry up your sources immediately. People want to raise their odds of survival and lower their risks, too.

Once one understands how to use the Coordination Compass components to analyze challenges, the skills or habits involved in the five component areas can be polished to improve the instant judgments we all make “in the blink of an eye.” Human judgment will never be perfect. It helps to get a second opinion and develop a few “second

opinions” yourself by looking to “balance both” in every situation. This can become almost as instantaneous a habit as our immediate first judgments are.

For instance, they say a hiring manager looks at the average candidate’s resume for only 17 seconds when deciding whether to keep it, toss it or call the person for an interview. Then they judge whether the candidate will fit within the first few seconds of the interview, most likely in significantly less than 30 seconds. The remainder of the time they spend looking for confirming evidence for these initial “blinks” of judgment.

In an interview, as an example, this leaves quite a bit of time to consider and test whether those first “blink” judgments stand up. However, a person cannot begin to assess that unless they first recognize they might not have made a balanced judgment to begin with. To paraphrase: you can’t teach yourself something you think you already know. So it helps to develop a habit of asking yourself for a second opinion and looking for it in the most likely place it might lie, the opposing “consider both” spot. Our ability to make snap first judgments is valuable. What we need to do is enhance them by “balancing both” more consciously, but with the speed and skill produced by habit and regular practice.

In the interview example, if you thought the person had low energy, then you could watch or ask for evidence or examples that would demonstrate clearly whether they do or don’t have plenty of energy for the things you need them to do. Just because someone looks laid back in an interview doesn’t mean they’ll treat their assignments casually. But if that was your first assessment, you will need to recognize this and think of ways to find out whether the opposite may be true. Then you can make a reasoned judgment.

In a tight situation you may have to act on first impressions, which is exactly why it helps to have your instant judgments skills in good shape. But most often you find there is time to analyze.

Practicing analysis when you have time is actually the practice you need to improve rapid judgment for when it’s required. By making these five sets of skills habitual, you’ll find yourself using them in both sorts of situations. The same principles apply not only at work, but to leading kids, spouses, friends and community groups toward better solutions as well. Fortunately we have the opportunity to practice in *every* situation.

Leadership is a generalized, all round skill that applies in every human activity. Paring down our understanding of it to five essential elements and practicing to become very good at the instant shorthand version (Balance Both; Coach Habits) will help to speed up our judgments and make them more effective in the “blinks” that ultimately comprise everything we do.

As John Lennon said, “Life is what happens while we’re making other plans.” He might have said as well, “Life happens more in the ‘blinks’ than through elaborate planning.” Let’s make both mechanisms point us toward luckier outcomes – lowering the risks of error, raising the odds of success! We don’t win by trying to avoid uncertainty, but by embracing it and becoming better at having it work in our favor. Embrace mistakes, don’t hide from them. “Possibility” only exists because we are *uncertain* of just how big our successes may become.