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Five Values That Guide Wise Leaders



by Ritch K. Eich

If you had told me three decades ago that my career path would include being asked to join the board of directors of my alma mater's half-million, living-member alumni association; that I would become the chair of our regional for-profit hospital's board of trustees; or that I would publish four books on leadership, I would have likely laughed out loud. But then again, I've always believed what my parents said about God working in "mysterious ways."

In retrospect, I think my curiosity with leadership can be traced back to being selected for the Marysville (CA) Little League "All-Star" team to play first base. The team's manager, Ralph Leslie Palm, was someone I greatly admired. He was a highly decorated WWII veteran with a calm, steady, and nurturing exterior backed up by an intensively competitive interior drive. It was a leadership approach that brought out the best every player had to offer.

Such leadership wisdom is not always appreciated in the moment and it is only in retrospect that the lessons of my childhood, post-season baseball coach are clear to me. As a healthcare and higher education executive since my early 30s, I have reported principally to either the CEO or president. Part of my responsibilities in these jobs was to have my boss' back, i.e. to ensure that he or she didn't make inadvertent mistakes that might damage the reputation of the organization.

As my leadership responsibilities grew, I made sure to develop an informal cadre of trusted advisers from widely divergent careers whose candor, good judgment and street-savvy I could count on when needed. Such a "community" advisory approach is what former Eli Lilly and Company senior executive and current Oakland University President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D., calls "a mentor's quilt." It's an approach that the University of Michigan and some U.S. presidents have chosen to embrace when they reach out to retired executive officers or cabinet officers for limited duration special assignments.

What follows are five essential values I believe most effective leaders possess. These values are based on the lessons I've learned from my own career and from several extraordinary leaders I've worked with over the years.

1. Practice the Golden Rule

Building a successful organizational culture requires enlightened recruiting practices that focus on hiring the right people, training them to be effective, and then continually investing in their careers. Without a workforce of engaged and committed people buoyed by such employee-focused practices, your leadership dreams won't come true. As Virgin Airlines founder Sir Richard Branson has said, "Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients."

Key take-away: *A wise leader is an honest leader who consistently shows respect for others, acts with humility, actively listens, shows compassion for all employees, and knows how and when to praise the work of others. Such a leader understands that diversity is an asset and accepts his or her natural responsibility as “a teacher” – as the renowned management consultant Peter Drucker pointed out numerous times during his decades of practice. In Noel M. Tichy’s book, “The Leadership Engine” (2007), Tichy describes a workshop in which he and Drucker participated where Drucker challenged a group of pharmaceutical executives to take up the teaching gauntlet telling them, “Force yourself to be a teacher, to get up in front of maybe your subordinates, maybe another group, and project to them, This is what I’m trying to do. This is what I’ve learned. This is what I am going to reach for.”*



A former White House press secretary to President Bill Clinton, Mike McCurry says that wisdom is acquired over time and that the process begins with authentic, diverse relationships, respectful conversation, and dialogue.

McCurry, who is currently of counsel with Public Strategies Washington, Inc. and Director/Professor of Wesley Theological Seminary’s Center for Public Theology, notes that the Golden Rule (treat others as we expect to be treated) is a good baseline belief for building the foundations of wisdom. He says that faith can reveal what is “good and true” before we apply reason and logic “to make sense of it all.”

One of the wisest people McCurry says he’s ever known is Bruce Babbitt, who was Secretary of the Interior (1993-2001) under President Clinton. He said Babbitt is a “deeply moral and principled person,” who worked throughout his life to demonstrate “what wise political leadership should be.”

Addressing the acquisition of wisdom, McCurry states:

“We associate wisdom with the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships that increase knowledge, common sense, insight and good judgment. Surely that is enhanced by exposing oneself to different views, diverse people, and interesting moments that reveal something about human nature. Wisdom would not come from, for instance, sitting in front of cable television all day long. It is the unpredictable and unanticipated that triggers those moments of insight which produce true wisdom.”

And with respect to restoring a sense of dignity and positive collective purpose in an era of divisiveness, intolerance, and moral surrender?

“I believe listening carefully to those who might hold different views is the key. One technique: if you are in a conversation with someone who holds different views, honestly restate that person’s position before you disagree. If you say “what I believe you are saying is XYZ” and if you do that in a genuine, authentic way, your opponent will know they have been heard and respected. That is the foundation of genuine dialogue.”

Whether faith, organized religion plays a role in the acquisition of wisdom, McCurry opines:

Faith calls us to respect a golden rule: we treat others as we would expect to be treated. We need more “golden rule” politics and dialogue. A good Methodist would cite our founder, John Wesley, and his “quadrilateral.” Wisdom and faith derive from scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. Scripture first and digging deeply into what we learn in the Bible. Our own experiences which reveal what is good and true. The traditions and teachings of the church. And the use of enlightened reason to make sense of it all.”

As to whether wisdom can be taught, he states:

“Techniques to acquire wisdom can be taught but some of this is innate and a gift from God.”

Expounding on his selection of an exemplar of wisdom, McCurry explains:

“My hero as stated before is Bruce Babbitt, whom I worked for when he ran for president in 1988. Bruce was not a natural politician – his results in the presidential primaries demonstrated that – but he is a deeply moral and principled person. Educated at Notre Dame and Harvard Law School, a civil rights attorney in the south post-Selma, and a visionary governor who developed Arizona’s unique health care system and a smart approach to protecting the state’s most scarce and important resource – water – Babbitt demonstrates the best in what wise political leadership should be. Bill Clinton would have put him on the U.S. Supreme Court had not objections come from western senators. I only lament that there are not more like him.”



2. Change is Inevitable; Be Prepared

The often-quoted Boy Scout Motto “Be Prepared!” served me well when I was a boy scout and it continues to serve me well today; this is a particularly important leadership standard given today’s corporate and political environment and the rapid, breathtaking rate of change. As one who has helped guide three major organizational change initiatives, I can attest to the importance of keeping this age-old trope in mind. Here are three suggestions to consider:

First, thoroughly scan your organization’s landscape and identify all the ways the change initiative could be scuttled. As one of my former bosses advised me: first, find the unexploded, hidden landmines, then identify the potential “rogue actors” and develop a written plan to deal with these threats. Keep your eye on these threats throughout the process and never underestimate the potential resistance to even a well-laid plan. Don’t be surprised by comments like: “We’ve done this before, and it didn’t work then.”

Second, embed the initiative in the organization and engage the entire workforce in the effort. Ensure that everyone involved has a voice and is consulted and supported along the way, even when the views offered are negative and skeptical of the plan. Failure to encourage expressions of skepticism, criticism, and opposing ideas quickly erodes any trust previously garnered in the process. In my first book, *Real Leaders Don’t Boss*, I offer a description of how former Indianapolis 500 “Rookie of the Year” race driver and current Chelsea Milling Company (“JIFFY” mix) CEO Howdy Holmes used some of these techniques to bring about major change for sustained superior performance that continues today.

Third, ensure that the CEO and his or her executive team understand the key idea that no single department (e.g. the marketing department) owns the change initiative and the implementation plan. Change must be an integral part of everyone’s role and responsibility, including upper management and the managers who report to them. I was hired by an organization whose governing board mandated the desired change with less than full buy-in from the executive team whose interest and commitment varied considerably. As a result, the initiative was an uphill challenge from the start without this essential and consistent support. Remember, change isn’t an abstract, academic event; it’s highly personal and emotions often run high. Inspired leadership never stops working to ensure that honest sharing of contrary views in a trusting environment is an essential element for organizational buy-in.

Key take-away: *The 2017 Academy Awards Best Picture nominee “Hidden Figures” is a movie about three brilliant and inspiring female African American NASA employees in the 1960s who used their intelligence and dogged determination to succeed, despite an atmosphere of degrading racism and sexism. The group – programmer Dorothy Vaughn, math genius Katherine Johnson, and engineers Mary Jackson [and Christine Darden] – all played a crucial role in America’s efforts to put astronaut John Glenn in space and best our Soviet nemesis. This film reminds us how difficult change can be in any organization, especially when years of traditions, habits, and behavioral norms stand in the way. Due to their tenacity, courage, and skill, these women – two posthumously – were awarded a Congressional Gold Medal, an honor recognized as the top civilian award in the U.S.*

In 1941, one of my favorite heroines, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a woman of great conviction and a tireless devotee for civil rights for African Americans, visited Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute during a period when much of our nation was highly skeptical of African Americans’ intelligence and aptitude. During her tour she mentioned that she had been told by many that black people couldn’t fly, and she asked C. Alfred Anderson, a black flight instructor, if he’d take her up! To the horror of her staff and Secret Service protection, he said “yes,” so the First Lady strapped herself into the back seat of a plane and flew with the sole black flight instructor who had a commercial pilot’s license. This same pilot would later train the famed Tuskegee Airmen.

3. Exhibit Integrity – No Lying, Cheating, or Stealing

Company leaders come and go, but few last very long without an ethical guiding “North Star” set of values. These values include a worthy purpose, a clear statement of organizational tenets, and a concise, easy-to-understand— and hopefully compelling — vision. If you need a reminder of the damage egregious behavior brings, think about the financial and corruption scandals at Wells Fargo Bank, Volkswagen, and Deutsche Bank, just to name a few recent examples. What kind of message does such ethics-free behavior send to other leaders in an organization? A lack of ethics is especially damaging to one of the vital functions of any thriving organization — i.e., identifying and nurturing future leaders, something that Max De Pree, Herman Miller, Inc., chairman emeritus, said is something the wisest leaders do.

Key take-away: *No one is perfect, even the wisest of leaders. However, there’s no substitute for doing what’s right, standing tall against corruption, bouncing back from failed initiatives, taking care of your team, and remaining optimistic in the face of adversity. Luis Alvarez, the late Cuban-born, NYPD detective, was a national hero whose love of family, fellow men and women in blue and country knew no bounds. Throughout his 20-year career including his “work on the pile” in the aftermath of 9/11, the Congressional testimony of this U.S. Marine Corps veteran in failing health (along with activist and actor Jon Stewart) will never be forgotten. Shortly after his death, Congress restored funding for the Victim Compensation Fund. Even as he testified while seated, he was taller than most of us...looking out for his fellow stricken Ground Zero first responders.*

4. Be Forward Thinking and Write a New Chapter

The wisest leaders are not just smart, they often have an uncanny ability to see things others cannot. I reported to the CEO of a large hospital for several years; he seemed to have

an ability to “see around the corner.” It is this type of ability that allows these leaders to move quickly to seize a market advantage. Columnist Tom Friedman believes that we, as a species, are standing at a moral intersection and today’s leaders have two pathways to follow. One begins the process of fixing everything (world poverty, terrorism, climate change – the big bucket things). Another path leads to the end of our species. Leaders must get ahead of these monumental challenges with values-driven leadership that moves us to a far better, more sustainable future.

A hallmark of the “JIFFY” Mix success story is Chelsea Milling Company President & CEO Howdy Holmes’ firm belief in the necessity of making long-term decisions. Emphasizing sustained competitive advantage is not a new concept for Holmes. Previously, he was a successful motor sports company executive, author, and one of the first color commentators on racing for ESPN. But it was a distinct shift in culture for the company when Holmes assumed the reins of Chelsea Milling 25 years ago. As he readily admits, Holmes had to redesign his own “personal delivery system” when he assumed the helm of the 132-year-old family-owned business. And, imagine the changes his grandfather had to make beginning in 1930 when his grandmother, Mabel White Holmes, created the first corn muffin mix in America. Howdy quickly learned that to be successful in transforming this packaged food company, his car racing experience didn’t matter, and he had to reinvent himself. And so he did, and as part of the company’s renaissance was Holmes’ strong commitment to personal growth for everyone in the firm, from hourly to salaried workers. Two years ago, he put in place a final pillar of the company’s reorganization by hiring a personal development director. Among the director’s many duties are giving every employee who wants to learn and grow new opportunities to expand their duties at work. Building on but expanding well beyond the firm’s historical and strong employee-centered philosophy, he implemented talent assessments, career progression, training opportunities, organizational evaluations, team building interventions, and competency models for his workers.

***Key take-away:** In “Moneyball,” the 2011 baseball movie that was nominated for six Oscars, the Oakland A’s general manager, Billy Beane, hires a Yale-educated data analyst to evaluate players’ potential using a nontraditional statistics-driven set of criteria. The A’s scouts and manager were outraged by the introduction of the new methodology, but eventually the innovative analytic technique is used to create a successful team, one that could operate on the league’s smallest payroll. Billy Beane wrote a new chapter in a very tradition-driven sport. Your goal as a leader should be to chart an innovative, forward-thinking path for your organization.*

Howdy Holmes on Wisdom:

Wisdom is the process of constantly seeking new information. Having wisdom also is the absence of judgment, and conversely, without judgment there is wisdom.

Wisdom has no boundaries. It’s something you can’t get enough of until you stop looking, and then it’s called experience. Wisdom comes from continuous personal growth and sharing wisdom requires letting go of judgment, prejudice, and bias.

The challenge for leaders is how best to incorporate their new knowledge and wisdom in decision-making. A related way to think about wisdom is that it's about receiving new forms of stimulation that often can make one feel uncomfortable or vulnerable; and if so, that is okay according to Holmes. In many ways, once we step outside our comfort zone, we take giant steps forward on the path of personal growth. Looking for, being open to, regularly pursuing new information without judgement or bias often separates the "good from the great."

Wisdom is not a singular answer to a particular problem or question: rather, it can represent a plethora of inputs often gathered from multiple sources that help guide one to pursue a particular course of action. Newly acquired information can disrupt our current belief system or expand it. Newly-found wisdom often heightens our ability to know what is appropriate. In our fast-paced, unpredictable world, it can help leaders determine what to say and how to say it. Wisdom enables leaders to have both content and context. Our constituents – whether they are employees, suppliers, vendors, investors, or others – expect leaders to have answers to all their questions. It's the nature of the beast.



5. Stand with a Cause Bigger Than Yourself

I greatly admire Navy pilot John McCain's story of survival as a POW and how he sacrificed so much for a cause he believed was greater than himself. As a U.S. Senator from Arizona, he built a reputation as someone who followed his own set of core values and ignored what others might think about his convictions.

I believe that every enterprise should stand for something larger and more important than the products or services they market. As chief of public relations at Blue Shield of California in San Francisco, I was given the responsibility to shepherd one of the company's core causes: domestic violence prevention. In 1999, we formed a partnership with the San Francisco Giants organization that continues today to do important work in the community. If you're interested in the details of how this partnership evolved, you can find it in my third book, *TRUTH, TRUST + TENACITY: How Ordinary People Become Extraordinary Leaders*.

Key take-away: Another powerful statement of faith and concern for one's team can be found in the farewell address of former U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis, General, USMC (ret), to Department of Defense employees. His message read in part: "Our Department's leadership, civilian and military, remains in the best possible hands. I am confident that each of you remains undistracted from our sworn mission to support and defend the Constitution while protecting our way of life. Our Department is proven to be at its best when the times are most difficult. So, keep the faith in our country and hold fast, alongside our allies, aligned against our foes." And then there is Ben Ferencz. He is 99 years old and is the last living prosecutor from the Nuremberg Trials who tried Nazi war criminals at the end of WW II. Leslie Stahl interviewed him recently on 60 Minutes. Despite his traumatic experience, Ferencz remains both an optimist and a realist when assessing the future. In fact, he's supporting this optimistic future by dedicating his life savings to the Genocide Prevention Institute at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. His message to the rest of us when the current state of affairs in our world discourages us: "it takes courage not to be discouraged." And finally, speaking of courage and wisdom, few national leaders have

responded as skillfully and sensitively as New Zealand's 39-year-old prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, did after the horrific terror attack on two Christchurch mosques that killed 50 Muslims. Her calm and steady demeanor under intense pressure, her substantial administrative skills in dealing with the crisis, as well as her integrity, faith, and genuine love for others were extraordinary. Equally remarkable, Ardern proposed sweeping gun control legislation within days of the massacre that the parliament overwhelmingly passed. And other initiatives are underway to strengthen the safety of all New Zealanders.

Conclusion

What, then, is wisdom? Clearly, it is not something that can necessarily be taught in a classroom. However, it can be acquired in degrees over time and under the right circumstances. I believe we can all become wiser if we remain curious, seek increasingly complex and challenging assignments in the workplace, associate with others whose life experiences differ from ours, read widely, travel broadly, volunteer for organizations seeking to change our communities or the world for the better, listen to those whose views we may not share, never stop learning, embrace the arts with an enthusiastic open mind, and engage in healthy introspection. As Socrates said, "Wonder is the beginning of wisdom."

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