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Leading with Passion – What It Means, Why It Matters

Introduction

In their assessment of the problems facing so many organizations today, Gallup’s Jim Clifton and Jim Harter unequivocally declared that “It’s the manager” who has failed in her/his obligation to engage and empower employees and to demonstrate the authentic leadership essential in establishing meaningful relationships (Clifton & Harter, 2019). The old saying, “I don’t care how much you know until I know how much you care” is clearly as true today as it has been for more than a century (Schwantes, 2022).

This ability to care, or to lead with passion, has increasingly been identified as a quality of today’s leaders and has been cited as an essential condition precedent for successful organizations (Duckworth, 2018; Love, 2012; Collins, 2001). Understanding the role of passion in building strong relationships has practical benefits for both leaders and followers. The focus of this paper is on identifying key elements of passion that contribute to effective leadership and to explain why leading with passion is so important in today’s highly competitive business climate.

We begin by identifying eight elements or qualities that are critical to leading with passion and cite the wisdom of well-regarded leadership scholars in explaining why each of those facets of leadership passion is vital for leaders today. We incorporate these insights to present a definition of leading with passion, clarify the importance of passion as a component of effective leadership, and note why leading with passion matters if leaders are to optimize their ability to create deeply committed organizations. We then offer five guiding principles to assist today’s leaders and managers for becoming caring and compassionate leaders and conclude

the paper with a challenge to those who wish to lead effectively to honor the duties that leadership demands.

Understanding Leading with Passion

As scholars have begun to recognize the importance of passion as an attribute of great leadership, they have identified eight elements that make up a leader's ability to influence, serve, and inspire others (Gallos & Bolman, 2021). The following is a brief summary of each of those elements and how they serve as the foundation of leading with passion.

Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility drives leaders when they recognize that they have a profoundly important purpose to achieve that demands their best efforts (Collins, 2001). Passion in leadership is most effective when leaders honor obligations to those with whom and for whom they labor (Hernandez, 2008). The commitment to valued goals and virtuous principles demonstrates the leader's integrity and personal worthiness to lead (Dantley, 2004). As Deborah Rhode (2006) has explained, leadership is an ethical relationship rather than a title and those who lead do so most effectively when they inspire – rather than simply directing or compelling – those whom they lead. Leaders who compromise ethical standards, disregard duties owed to others, and pursue questionable short-term policies find that they ultimately lose their ability to lead, harm their own reputations, and fail to earn others' long-term respect and followership (Ciulla, 2021).

Recognition of Opportunity

As leaders come to recognize their potential to lead and serve, they are also able to identify their inherent capabilities in making a contribution to the world (DePree, 2004). This recognition is achieved as a result of the leader's awareness of her/his identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) and an appreciation of the benefits of serving others (Greenleaf, 2002). The recognition of opportunity fulfilled in giving of oneself through service enables individuals to fulfill their moral identities (Sun, 2018). Driven by a desire to transcend past achievements and become the best possible version of themselves, such leaders view their identities and their roles as the opportunity to not only achieve themselves but to unlock the greatness that lies within others (Covey, 2004). Fulfilling that opportunity drives them to a higher level of personal effort (Maslow, 1994).

Commitment to Excellence

Jim Collins (2001, p. 1), author of the landmark book, *Good to Great*, confirmed by extensive empirical research that truly effective leaders recognize that "Good is the enemy of great." Collins (2001) found that those who lead with passion understand that the commitment to excellence is the key to achieving organizations that grow and thrive in the highly competitive global environment. The passion for excellence was confirmed nearly four decades ago as the critical leadership difference that enabled those who lead to influence others and earn their highest commitment (Peters & Austin, 1985). This ability to recognize that dedication and hard work make great achievements possible has repeatedly been confirmed by the research of Angela Duckworth (2018).

Bias for Action

The bias for action is at the heart of passionate leadership – enabling organizations to make the transition from being "busy" to producing meaningful results (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004).

Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal (2004) explain that this bias to act enables leaders to not only exercise their own willpower through a combination of energy and focus, but to unlock those same qualities in others. Evolving from the writings of David Hume, action theory emphasizes the importance of combining a belief that a goal is achievable with a compelling desire to achieve that goal (Radcliffe, 2018). The strength of the desire to achieve a goal is the underlying basis for individual passion and the willingness to invest the personal time, energy, and resources to accomplish a valued result (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005).

Valuing Others

Passionate leadership begins with valuing others and being deeply committed to their growth and wholeness (Burns, 2010; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Gallos and Bolman (2021, p. 295) explain that passion is a “deep emotional investment rooted in love.” That valuing or caring about others and their welfare has long been identified as the essence of love, and great leaders love those whom they serve (Autry, 1992; Hoyle, 2001; Anderson, Caldwell, & Barfuss, 2019). Much has been written about the importance of genuinely loving others as the heart of leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Fromm, 2006; Caldwell & Anderson, 2019). This valuing of others has often been called a “covenantal duty” and a sacred responsibility of leadership (Greenleaf, 2002; Pava, 2003; DePree, 2004; Covey, 2004).

Constant Perseverance

The ability to persevere and to maintain a constant effort is motivated by the fierce resolve to accomplish worthy goals (Duckworth, 2018). A leader’s unrelenting drive sets an example for others and reflects the leader’s personal dedication to excel (Collins, 2001). Perseverance reflects the sustained focus on achieving a challenging outcome, often recognizing that there are no “instant pudding” solutions to accomplishing long-term priorities (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Perseverance is the unwillingness to be satisfied with what has previously been accomplished. The hard work, tough-mindedness, and effort required in perseverance has been recognized as more important than intellect to achieve success (van Gelderen, 2012).

Visionary Perspective

Passion is based upon a visionary perspective that is the combination of faith in oneself, the ability to understand what is required to make the effort accomplish what needs to be done, the perspective to see the path required to ultimately achieve success, and clarity about the value of achieving a worthy result (Panton, Paul, & Wiggers, 2014). The capacity to envision a future success motivates the self to make the sacrifices required to turn the vision into reality (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004). Passion’s perspective about how to achieve sought-after outcomes requires a clear vision of the steps that sustain performance and translate a strategic plan into a final outcome and successful implementation requires the alignment of values, principles, and united effort (Pfeffer, 1998).

Optimistic Enthusiasm

Leading with passion employs optimistic enthusiasm to motivate the inner fire that benefit others—coupled with the belief that desired outcomes will ultimately be achieved. The sustainability of effort motivated by enthusiasm is a critical factor in enduring the disappointments, hard work, and delays that inevitably occur while striving to accomplish a complex task (Shrivastava, 2010). Lee Bolman and Terry Deal (2007) explained that passionate leadership requires this optimistic enthusiasm despite the challenges that face

virtually every organization and that challenge the hearts of team members. Such leadership affirms “something new and better really is out there” and can be achieved by united effort (Bolman & Deal, 2006, p. 3).

Figure 1: Eight Elements of Leading with Passion



Figure 1 identifies how each of these elements contributes to leading with passion. Each of the elements serve to reinforce each other as a leader carries out the task of guiding others in the pursuit of organization goals. Despite the pitfalls of unexpected barriers and temporary failure, leading with passion elevates the ability of a leader and those with whom (s)he works to maintain the effort, energy, and endurance to persist and to overcome the obstacles required to achieve a valued goal. Leading with passion empowers a leader to enable others to cast off fear, doubt, and limiting beliefs and replace those feelings with optimism, hope, increased commitment, and greater energy (Murphy, 2010). Table 1, provided here, identifies how the respective elements of leading with passion contribute to the effectiveness of employees and the organizations in which they labor.

Table 1: Elements of Passion and Why They Matter

Passion Element	Organizational Benefit	Comment
Moral Responsibility	Provides the standards for accomplishing the purpose of the organization and the values that guide those who participate.	Establishes a personal example of the standards that guide the organization and clarifies the importance of the outcome.
Recognition of Opportunity	Identifies the higher-level benefit that can be achieved and the contribution to others that can result.	Enables others to also understand the purpose and value of the desired outcome and how they can contribute.
Commitment to Excellence	Recognizes the need to be world class in order to add value that benefit the world.	Holds the organization accountable to being excellent and enables it to sustain itself and compete.

Bias for Action	Focuses on doing what needs to be done to convert good ideas and intentions into results that make a difference.	Understands the importance of the key factors that are absolutely necessary to achieve desired outcomes that determine success.
Valuing Others	Treats participants as valued owners and partners and thereby earns their followership, trust, and commitment.	Touches lives and enables others to become the best versions of themselves by communicating to others their worth.
Constant Perseverance	Follows through with unyielding determination, despite obstacles that must be faced and overcome.	Demonstrates the fierce resolve and dedication that sustain effort necessary to ultimately succeed.
Visionary Perspective	Understands the context of what is required and the steps ultimately necessary to achieve a goal.	Perceives the importance of the key factors required that distinguish great achievements.
Optimistic Enthusiasm	Encourages the hearts of others and builds morale and dedication even when disappointments may occur.	Maintains a positive perspective that overcomes discouragement and sustains those with whom (s)he labors.

Leading with passion matters because it enables organizations and their members to more fully discover the potential greatness that they can achieve (Maslow, 1994). The research of Gallup conducted in more than 160 different countries affirmed that the failure of leaders to build relationships that demonstrated leaders’ commitment to employees and the priorities of their organizations eroded employee engagement and their trust of those leaders (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

Today’s employees expect far more from their leaders and from their jobs than simply a day’s pay for a day’s work. Specifically, Clifton and Harter, (2019, p. 11) articulate those expectations.

- *Employees want more than a paycheck. They want their job to fulfill a meaningful purpose.*
- *Employees want more than job satisfaction. They seek their own personal and professional development.*
- *Employees do not want their supervisor to be their “boss.” They want a coach who helps them to grow and improve.*
- *Employees do not want an annual review as a means of feedback. They want ongoing conversations that demonstrate a supervisor’s commitment to their performance.*
- *Employees do not want to learn only about their weaknesses and mistakes. They want their employer to focus on helping them enhance their strengths.*
- *Employees are not interested solely in the job. They want their employers to help them achieve a better life.*

Those leaders who lead with passions respond to these expectations and help their organizations to unlock their potential.

Definition of Leading with Passion

Gallos and Bolman (2021, p. 295) defined passion as a “deep emotional investment that is rooted in love.” Other researchers defined passion as “an intense and powerful feeling of commitment, compelling desire, and enthusiasm directed toward a purpose, institution,

person, or objective” (Caldwell & Anderson, 2022, p. 20). Commitment in leading with passion is associated with each of the eight elements cited above.

Angela Duckworth (2018), author of *GRIT: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, explained the importance of purpose, intent, and perseverance in leading with passion, coupled with actions that demonstrate those factors. Clearly, leading with passion is far more than an intense feeling. Murphy (2010, p. 36) stated that “leading with passion is about courageously casting off fear, doubt, and limiting beliefs and giving people a sense of hope, optimism, and accomplishment. . . passion is a heartfelt energy that flow through us, not from us.” Peter Northouse (2021 p. 223) concluded that those who lead are authentic leaders who combine actions with feelings. By their personal examples, those who lead with passion ignite the energy and commitment of those whom they lead and serve (Collins, 2001).

Integrating the elements of leading with passion with the insights of leadership scholars, we define leading with passion as “*the integration of the intense desire to accomplish a worthy goal with actions that demonstrate a personal commitment to honoring duties owed to self and to others in the pursuit of excellence.*”

Guiding Principles

We have identified five guiding principles to guide today’s leaders and managers in their quest to become effectiveness within their organizations. These principles are applicable to leaders in diverse organizations, whether in business, higher education, non-profit, governmental agencies, or healthcare.

1. **Passion demands total personal commitment.** Those who lead must be prepared to personally dedicate themselves to achieving a desired outcome. The evidence from the research is that the failure of leaders to be fully invested undermines the commitment and effort of others and diminishes an organization’s performance (Clifton & Harter, 2019).
2. **Passion requires constant adaptation.** The learning process for success requires the capacity to learn from experiences and make the changes necessary to improve performance (Duckworth, 2018). Knowing how to examine why less than ideal results have been achieved and being willing to persist in improving are essential to effectively adapt.
3. **Passion focuses on success.** Being positive means viewing each experience as positively as possible – including identifying what is learned even when outcomes are sub-optimal. Celebrating each small success and emphasizing results that represent improvement build morale and generate enthusiasm about future success (Chester, 2015).
4. **Passion engages others as valued partners.** Passionate leaders understand the importance of integrated efforts in achieving success and treat those with whom they work as valued owners and partners (Block, 2013). Such leaders view their obligation to those with whom they work to be a covenantal responsibility which reflect the leader’s debt owed to stakeholders (DePree, 2004).
5. **Passion motivates leaders to be stewards.** In the pursuit of worthy goals, the most effective passionate leaders honor the duties of the ethical steward (Caldwell, Hayes & Long, 2010; Hernandez, 2012). Such leaders are committed to optimizing long-term outcomes that benefit all stakeholders and produce results that are often innovative and surprising (Contrafatto, 2014; Dominguez-Escrig, *et al.*, 2019).

Each of these five principles strengthens the ability of leaders to not only demonstrate their own passion for accomplishing a valuable outcome but to inspire others with whom they work to increase their efforts to follow their example (Collins, 2001).

The Challenge

The great benefit of leading with passion is that it enables individuals to match their commitment to achieving an outcome with their ability to care about others who contribute to success. Leading with passion leads those who lead to be able to enhance their self-control and focus as they demonstrate their dedication to accomplishing their goal. The unfortunate reality of most organizations is that those who manage have failed to be effective as leaders (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Schwantes, 2022).

By recognizing the need to not only be committed to excellence but to be genuinely caring and committed to virtuous principles (Cameron, 2011), those who lead are able to honor the responsibilities of leadership, achieve worthy goals, and measurably improve organizations and the colleagues whom they lead. In their exhaustive study of organizations in more than 160 countries worldwide, Gallup Research has confirmed the importance of effective leadership as the difference maker in successful organizations. Leaders who lead with high commitment to employees' growth, who pursue the best interests of customers, and who engage employees as full partners create organization cultures that unlock organization potential and create long-term value (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

We challenge leaders to reassess their styles, behaviors, characteristics, as well as their levels of engagement and interactions within their organizations and make a thoughtful decision to lead with passion. We encourage leaders to adopt the elements of leading with passion by adopting the guiding principles suggested herein as they seek to motivate, inspire and develop a clearer vision for their organizations and honor their responsibilities to society and to the employees whom they both lead and serve.

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