

Highlights from ... "Leadership is an Art" by Max DePree

"This is the best book ever written on the subject of business leadership." – James O'Toole, Graduate School of Business University of Southern California

"This is a wonderful book. It captures Max's spirit – and he's a truly exceptional person. But it also says more about leadership in clearer, more elegant, and more convincing language than many of the much longer books that have been published on the subject." – Peter F. Drucker

On Leadership ...

Leadership is much more an art, a belief, a condition of the heart, than a set of things to do.

Leaders, in a special way, are liable for what happens in the future, rather than what is happening day to day. The emphasis on duties and performance of leaders has to be on the future.

Momentum comes from a clear vision of what the corporation ought to be, from a well-thought-out strategy to achieve that vision, and from carefully conceived and communicated directions and plans that enable everyone to participate and be publicly accountable in achieving those plans.

I am certainly aware of the growing sophistication of trained managers these days. Their skills at quantification are admirable. But I sometimes wonder how often they focus on the spirit? Do they examine what will be important tomorrow and not just the operational matters of today?

It is more difficult, but far more important, to be committed to a corporate concept of persons, the diversity of human gifts, covenantal relationships, lavish communications, including everyone, and believing that leadership is a condition of indebtedness.

The measure of individuals – and so of corporations – is the extent to which we struggle to complete ourselves, the energy we devote to living up to our potential. An elegant company frees its members to be their best. Elegant leaders free the people they lead to do the same. At the office or in the plant, we see only sides of people but the parts of people we see at work may give us little idea of their completeness.

Likewise, a short-term look at the financial status of a corporation or a dependence on immediate financial results will lead to a partial and perhaps twisted view of the whole picture.

Choosing leaders is the most vital and important matter corporations face. Leaders are responsible for future leadership. A future leader:

- Has consistent and dependable integrity.
- Cherishes heterogeneity and diversity.
- Searches out competence.
- Is open to contrary opinion.
- Communicates easily at all levels.
- Leads through serving.
- Is vulnerable to the skills and talents of others.
- Is intimate with the organization and its work.
- Is able to see the broad picture (beyond his own area of focus.)
- Is a spokesperson and diplomat.
- Can be a “tribal storyteller” (an important way of transmitting our corporate culture.)
- Tells “why” rather than “how.”
- Would be a person you would seek out as a key resource on an important task force.
- Has a vision.
- Is respected and trusted by their peers.

On Relationships ...

The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving? Do they achieve the required results? Do they change with grace? Manage conflict? Try to think about a leader as one who serves.

When we think about the people with whom we work, people on whom we depend, we can see that without each individual, we are not going to go very far as a group. By ourselves we suffer serious limitations. Together we can be something wonderful.

In addition to all of the ratios and goals and parameters and bottom lines, it is fundamental that leaders endorse a concept of persons. This begins with an understanding of the diversity of people’s gifts and talents and skills. Recognizing diversity gives us the chance to provide meaning, fulfillment, and purpose, which are not to be relegated solely to private life any more than such things as love, beauty, and joy. The art of leadership lies in polishing and liberating and enabling those gifts.

A whale is as unique as a cactus. But don’t ask a whale to survive Death Valley. We all have special gifts. Where we use them and how determines whether we actually complete something.

In most vital organizations, there is a common bond of interdependence, mutual interest, interlocking contributions, and simple joy. Part of the art of leadership is to see that this common bond is maintained and strengthened, a task certainly requiring good communication. Just as any relationship requires honest and open communication to stay healthy, so the relationships within corporations improve when information is shared accurately and freely.

It is better to err on the side of sharing too much information than risk leaving someone in the dark. Information is power, but it is pointless power if hoarded. Power must be shared for an organization or a relationship to work. We owe each other truth and courtesy, though truth is sometimes a real constraint, and courtesy inconvenient. But make no mistake – these are the qualities that allow communication to educate and liberate us.

Good communication means a respect for the individual.

On Vision, Mission and Values ...

Only through good communication can we convey and preserve a common corporate vision.

An increasingly large part that communication plays in expanding cultures is to pass along values to new members and reaffirm those values to old hands. A corporation's values are its life blood. Without effective communication, actively practiced, without the art of scrutiny, those values will disappear in a sea of trivial memos and impertinent reports.

Leaders need to be concerned with the institutional value system. Leaders owe a clear statement of the values of the organization. These values should be broadly understood and agreed to and should shape our corporate and individual behavior.

Every family, every college, every corporation, every institution needs "tribal storytellers." The penalty for failing to listen is to lose one's history, one's historical context, and one's binding values.

Successful entrepreneur-ships tend to become corporations. Successful corporations tend to become institutions. Institutions foster bureaucracy, the most superficial and fatuous of all relationships. Bureaucracy can level our gifts and our competence. Tribal storytellers, the tribe's elders, must insistently work at the process of corporate renewal. They must preserve and revitalize the values of the tribe. They nourish a scrutiny of corporate values that eradicates bureaucracy and sustains the individual. Constant renewal also readies us for the inevitable crises of corporate life.

The goal of renewal is to be a corporate entity that gives us space to reach our potential as individuals and through that, as a corporation. Renewal comes through genuine service to others. It cannot come about through a process of mere self-perpetuation. Renewal is an outward orientation of service, rather than an inward orientation of maintenance. Renewal is the concern of everyone, but it is the special province of the tribal storyteller.

Work should be and can be productive and rewarding, meaningful and maturing, enriching and fulfilling, healing and joyful. Work is one of our greatest privileges.

Life is more than just reaching our goals. As individuals and as a group we need to reach our potential. Nothing else is good enough.

On "Entropy" ...

[When asked, "What is one of the most difficult things that you personally need to work on?" Max DePree said, "The interception of entropy."]

From a corporate management point of view, I choose to define entropy as meaning that everything has a tendency to deteriorate. One of the important things leaders need to learn is to recognize the signals of impending deterioration.

Many people in large organizations relish apathy. They often fail to see the signs of entropy:

- A tendency toward superficiality.
- A dark tension among key people.
- No longer having time for celebration and ritual.
- A growing feeling that rewards and goals are the same.
- When people stop telling tribal stories or cannot understand them.
- A recurring effort by some to convince others that business is, after all, quite simple (the acceptance of complexity and ambiguity and the ability to deal with them constructively are essential.)
- When problem-makers outnumber problem-solvers.
- When people begin to have different understandings of words like "responsibility" or "service" or "trust."
- When people confuse heroes and celebrities.
- Leaders who seek to control rather than liberate.
- When the pressures of day-to-day operations push aside our concern for vision and risk (vision and risk can never be separated.)
- An orientation toward the dry rules of business school rather than a value orientation that takes into account such things as contribution, spirit, excellence, beauty, and joy.
- When people speak of customers as impositions on their time rather than as opportunities to serve.
- Manuals.
- The urge to establish ratios.
- Leaders who rely on structures instead of people.
- A loss of confidence in judgment, experience, and wisdom.
- A loss of grace and style and civility.

On Change ...

In the end, it is important to remember that we cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are.

The creative process in today's corporation is by its very nature difficult to handle. Anything creative results in change, and if there is one thing a well-run bureaucracy or institution or major corporation finds difficult to handle, it is change.