

Leadership Philosophy 2024 Edition

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A Journey

What is leadership? It is a question I reflect on almost daily. I believe leadership is built from components like character, personal values, and the desire to serve others. It is something that changes over time and that we can all learn and improve. Kouzes and Posner write, “One of the greatest myths about leadership is that some people have “it” and some don’t. A corollary myth is that if you don’t have “it” then you can’t learn “it”. Neither could be further from the empirical truth” (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p. 12). As a lifelong learner and teacher, the ability to learn and grow as a leader feels vitally important. I’m on a quest to continue evolving as a leader and human.

Simon Sinek said, “Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.” (Sinek, 2015). “Taking care of those in your charge” is the bedrock of my leadership belief system and guides what I do as a leader, how I show up, and ultimately the decisions I make each day. As leaders, we are required to make difficult decisions for the good of our teams and organization. I worked with an employee who was struggling with the basic functions of his job. We had been working together to improve his performance. He often went home frustrated and ruminating over mistakes. He took those feelings home to his family each night. It was painful to move him to a different role but within a short period, he started to feel successful again, leaving work stress behind and regaining confidence. Taking care of those in your charge doesn’t mean making it easy or doing the work for them. It can mean making hard decisions and knowing in your heart it was the right thing.

My Leadership Philosophy

As a leader, I strive to make genuine connections with people without positional authority. I do this by investing time in building relationships, listening with curiosity and empathy, and genuinely caring about the other person. Connecting, caring, and building relationships are not only strengths for me, they are leadership essentials. Brene Brown said, “Caring for and connecting to the people we lead is an

irreducible prerequisite to effective leadership, if you can't do that for people — move them out of your direct line" (Piermont, 2020).

Leader-member exchange theory (LMX), supports this type of connected leadership. LMX is focused on the relationship between leaders and followers (Northouse, 2022, p. 157). High-quality communication exchanges are an essential element of LMX. Northouse writes, "In a meta-analysis of 164 LMX studies... leader-member exchange was consistently related to member job performance, satisfaction (overall and supervisory), commitment, role conflict and clarity, and turnover intentions (Northouse, p.160). I have made many genuine connections throughout my career. I was asked to temporarily lead a manufacturing department for 3 months during a high-stress/high-demand period in our organization. I needed to quickly get to know the team (>25 people) and help them perform at a very high production level. I started asking a question of the day. Each morning I shared the question with the entire team and then worked my way through the department checking in with individuals and hearing their answers to the question. During that time with each team member, I was able to listen to any other questions they had and address challenges. I held space for them each day, a sacred space. They could rely on me to connect with each of them, each day. I quickly learned a lot about the team and an unexpected bonus was that they started asking each other the questions which led to a deeper understanding of each other, more support of team members, and a real sense of team unity.

As a leader, I deeply value people and their unique and wonderful contributions. I believe we each bring something extraordinary to this world and I want to honor and celebrate those contributions. I see the potential in others frequently before they see it in themselves, and I delight in empowering individuals to recognize their gifts and then connecting them with others who can support them along their journey. Steven M.R.Covey writes, "People have greatness inside them, so my job as a leader is to unleash the potential, not control them" (Covey, 2022, p.81). I have had many opportunities to encourage team members to look beyond their current roles and explore more challenging opportunities.

One of my employees had rejoined the workforce after years as a full-time caregiver for her children. She was driven to learn, succeed and was a great communicator. Quickly she built rapport with our team and took the lead on tasks and projects. We talked a lot about leadership and her path forward. When she was unsure, I would remind her that she joined our manufacturing team she had never used a tool before, and now she was building dental equipment. Her confidence continued to grow with reminders about how much she was learning and accomplishing, how capable she was, and the value she brought to the team. Today she is a graduate of our emerging leadership program and has shared that her mindset about work has transitioned from a job to a career.

Transformational leadership is described by Northouse as “...the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. This type of leader is attentive to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their fullest potential” (Northouse, 2022, p.186). Showing up as a transformational leader 100% of the time is probably impossible when so much day-to-day work is transactional, but it can be accomplished when we create moments with people. Moments happen when we pause, listen, and invest time. That is something that I prioritize each and every day.

As a leader, I endeavor to serve everyone based on their individual needs moving past the golden rule and instead treating others as *they* wish to be treated. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. To achieve this there are several things I can do. The first is to create an environment of psychological safety where team members are supported and can bring their full selves to work. To do that, I model the behaviors I want to see like normalizing vulnerability, supporting team members, staying in curiosity, and out of judgment. Secondly, I can adapt my style to meet the needs of my team members, by asking questions, and delivering what they need, realizing that changes from person to person, project to project, and even from day to day. The Situational Leadership model (SLII) is a methodology that utilizes supportive and directive leadership depending on the situation at hand. Northouse writes, “SLII is constructed around the

idea that followers move forward and backward along the development continuum... For leaders to be effective, it is essential that they determine where followers are on the development continuum and adapt their leadership style to match their followers' development levels" (Northouse, 2022, p. 112).

A supportive leadership style is my comfort zone, it is a high-support, low-direction style. I know great things never come from comfort zones and yet it can be seductive to stay there. I have experienced many situations where my supportive style doesn't deliver what a team member needs. I worked with a team lead who was brand new to leadership. I realized that she required a more directive style. She needed specific information about what the task was and how to achieve it and for me to regularly check in on her progress. She didn't have enough experience to experiment or figure it out on her own. Delivering a more directive style felt uncomfortable and I kept reminding myself that it was what she needed at that moment and that as she gained more confidence and skills, I would need to adjust the type of support I delivered again to her new needs. It was a good lesson that leadership isn't about me being comfortable. It is about setting people up for success and supporting them wherever they are.

The Way for Me

Core values inform my leadership practice and guide me as I make decisions for the future. My core values are to make a difference and share joy. I can make a difference as a leader, and it all begins with the people I lead and interact with. Taking time to really know my team, listening to their goals, aspirations, hopes, and dreams, as well as the things they are struggling with personally and professionally. How can I support them where they are today?

Sharing joy is deeply linked to my teaching and facilitation. I am an obsessed learner and it's not enough for me to know it. I crave sharing knowledge with others and I feel real pride in creating 'ah ha' moments when someone connects with the concept. Even more exciting is when they can take an idea and use it, creating better outcomes.

The statement “I choose joy” is part of my DNA! Being a leader enables me to create an environment where we can have fun and do important meaningful work together. Joy, like most emotions, is very contagious. My goal is to spread as much positivity and joy as I can. That doesn’t mean I ignore problems or put my head in the sand when things go wrong. It does mean I work to create a workplace that feels good and where people want to be. We spend a lot of our lives at work, so I firmly believe that we need to have fun while we are working! I am focused on creating a community of kindness where we respect each other, work hard, and have fun. I do this through a practice of gratitude, encouraging others, and linking our work to a higher purpose.

A Journey Forward

Coming back to Sinek once again, “Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.” (Sinek, 2015). That simple quote has guided me throughout my leadership journey. It reminds me to set my ego aside and serve the people I am leading. Leaders have a lot of responsibility, and the day-to-day whirlwind of work can feel enormous. One of my colleagues Debbie Brannan often says, “People are not an interruption of your work, people are your work.” That phrase... “people are your work” is a daily mantra for me.

As I grow in my career as a leader, teacher, facilitator, mother, wife, and community member I seek opportunities where I can make a difference and care for the people around me. That space, leading from my heart is where I show up as my best self and where the magic happens. In my current role, I have the honor of leading our organization’s leadership development efforts. This work challenges and fulfills me. The leaders in my programs have been able to take ideas they learn and practice to their departments with results like increased engagement, participation, idea sharing, and overall cooperation. I am thrilled to be able to continue exploring leadership theories, methods, best practices, and ideas and then delivering that content in a way that positively impacts others.

Resources

Covey S.M.R., (2022). Trust and inspire. How truly great leaders unleash greatness in others. *Simon & Schuster*.

Kouzes J., Posner B., (2017). The leadership challenge. How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations. 6th edition. *Wiley*.

Northouse, P. (2022). Leadership. Theory and Practice (11th ed.). *Sage*.

Piermont, K. (2020, May 4). *The Courage to Care: Dr. Brené Brown Opens a History-Making Summit 2020*. Retrieved January 26, 2024, from <https://www.forrester.com/blogs/courage-to-care-brene-brown/>

Sinek, S. (2015, January 28). *Leadership*. X. Retrieved January 26, 2024, from <https://twitter.com/simonsinek/status/560513329148723202?lang=en>