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PART I

THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

Many people aspire to leadership. It's a shame that they don't focus on what leadership means. Or what it requires. Because, unlike wealth or celebrity, true leadership does require a lot from those who would achieve it. And what is required is not always what the aspirants think.

1

WHAT'S A TRANSCULTURAL LEADER ANYWAY?

When I began to write this book, I opened my dictionary to look up the word “leader”, just to see how its editors’ definition would compare to mine. I found all sorts of quirky tidbits: I learned that a leader can be the shoot of a plant; a newspaper editorial or a blank section at the beginning or end of a reel of film, among other things. Interesting, but none too useful for my purposes. Another entry defines a leader as one who leads or a guide or conductor or one who has commanding authority. Getting warmer, but these phrases still don’t do justice to a word that, in my view, should convey volumes. Simply having – or even commanding – authority does not make a person a leader. When I closed the book, it occurred to me that it’s probably easier to define what a leader is not. A person is not a leader because he or she happens to hold a high rank or title, or occupy a corner office. A true leader might, in fact, do both, but there are plenty of people with impressive titles on their business cards and football-field-sized offices who are not leaders. I like to call these folks LINO’s – Leaders In Name Only. LINO’s typically get their positions by concentrating primarily on their own advancement – not on the job at hand, not on the good of the organization they work in and not on the welfare of their colleagues. Once in place, they hold on for dear

life by surrounding themselves with yes-men – mirror-image managers who do their bidding without question or challenge. LINO's believe this is the way to maintain control, but it's actually a myopic strategy that has left many a company and organization unprepared to face the challenges posed by our fast-changing world. At its worst, this way of doing business has resulted in many of the cases of corruption that have preoccupied the nightly news in recent years. Open any newspaper and you'll find LINO's on every other page, in business, and in politics, too. They lack backbone and conviction about any topic other than the preservation of their jobs and the perks that go with them. They might make the cut into the dictionary definition of a leader, but not mine.

HALLMARKS OF LEADERSHIP

At the most fundamental level, a true leader must guide others to accomplish the work of the organization. How he perceives that work, and the spirit in which she offers that guidance, are key. Here are a few of the hallmarks of true leaders as I have observed them:

- **The leader must be open.** Only through openness can he or she learn enough to make informed decisions, adopt innovative ideas, get warning of obstacles ahead and otherwise stay attuned to the world outside the organization. I don't think you can be a leader if you believe there's only one way (your way) to do something. And openness goes both ways. Not only must the leader be open to hearing from the team, he or she must also share openly with them. It's imperative for a leader to be willing to have a

dialogue, to answer questions straightforwardly. (And if you can't answer at a given moment, be honest about that, too.)

- As a corollary, the leader must forge teams comprising the most diverse group of people possible to ensure that their work is grounded in the broadest possible spectrum of information.

- **A leader must embody integrity and inspire trust.** If you want to motivate people to follow you and get the job done, you'll do best if they trust and respect you and know that you are being honest with them.
 - As a corollary, you must cultivate your memory, so that you can make good on your promises. (Diaries, in whatever form, are a big help, as is a good assistant.)

- **A leader must understand his or her own and his or her organization's objectives.** Only with clear knowledge of these objectives can he or she set goals for the team that are high but achievable.
 - As a corollary, the leader must know how to set goals and make decisions based on consultation with his or her team. Once the decisions are made, he or she must know how to implement them.

- **A leader must have an optimistic, can-do outlook.** Nothing is worse for motivating the troops than a leader with a bad attitude. By contrast, assuming a leader has set achievable goals, a can-do attitude can set the tone for the team's labors and secure their emotional investment in getting the job done.
 - As a corollary, a leader must guard against rose-colored-glasses syndrome. If obstacles emerge, the leader must not brush them off with false optimism but, rather, work with the team to devise ways to overcome them.

- **A leader must know how to use and not abuse authority.** He or she must respect others in the organization, whatever their rank.
 - As a corollary, the leader must be aware that all members of the team have personal lives as well as work lives and that the two must be balanced.
- **A leader must cultivate humility.** He or she must recognize that work gets done by teams, so credit must be shared. A leader should be able to recognize his or her team publicly and often.
 - As a corollary, a leader should have a sense of humor, a trait that is often overlooked. Being able to share a laugh and not take yourself too seriously is a great plus in motivating a team.
- **The leader must consider not just the present, but the future.** He or she must therefore focus on the careers of others in the organization and must actively foster their development, both by mentoring individuals and by creating an atmosphere where professional growth is prized and people are encouraged to take on new challenges.
 - As a corollary, the leader must ultimately put in place a workable succession plan.

These are the hallmarks of business leadership. Too long for a dictionary definition, I'm afraid, but there they are. And there's more to add.

A decade or two ago, the above might have been enough, but as I've said earlier, the marketplace is not what it was a decade or two ago. Increasingly, business is conducted across national borders by parties whose cultural values and customs are dramatically different. Countries once known as "third world" or "developing" are stepping up to take a

larger, more assertive role on the world stage, and the old assumption that their people will passively accept conditions imposed on them by Western nations no longer holds, if it ever did. At the same time, divisions within the West are more and more apparent. This is why I contend that we need not just leaders, but transcultural leaders. And so I must add the following to the qualities listed above:

- **The transcultural leader is sensitive to national and cultural differences.** He or she factors these differences into his or her business dealings.
 - As a corollary, the transcultural leader knows that there is much *to know* and knows how and where to get advice on moving around and doing business in unfamiliar locales.

THE TRANSCULTURAL ANGLE

What do this last bullet point and its corollary mean in practical terms? I've seen this concept go right to the bottom line. Neglect cultural issues and, as would be the case if you neglected any other aspect of the transaction at hand, you might imperil the entire deal. I recall one case in which a deal fell through because the two sides – American and Japanese, as it happened – did not understand each other's negotiating customs. The Japanese company was interested in buying a division of an American firm. The Japanese team did extensive due diligence, but was reluctant to make an offer because their valuation of the business was below the "expected price" as communicated by the seller's investment banker. The Japanese company assumed that the Americans

would be offended by the lower bid, as would have been the case in their country. The Americans, on the other hand, assumed that the Japanese would make a bid and then negotiate. I was the advisor to the Japanese company and I spent hours explaining the way such deals worked in the United States: the prospective buyer makes an offer and then both parties follow up with a negotiation. I was ready to fly to Tokyo to explain it to their top management. My counterparts on the American side did not want to hear about cultural differences. They were motivated to sell, sure, but they just assumed that they would get multiple bids and didn't want to listen to me or my clients until it was too late. So what could have been a mutually beneficial deal never happened.

How do you avoid this kind of cultural fiasco? I can speak from my own experience and say that, over the years, I learned never to go into a place that was new to me without first finding out how to properly conduct a meeting there, how to get the salutations and courtesy titles right, how to deal with seating, dining, coffee/tea etiquette and, of course, how to make and respond to an offer in a negotiation. I learned, too, to go beyond the dos and don'ts of your business agenda and learn about how things are done in daily life there. Do you, for example, tip for service? If so, how much? Do you shake hands on meeting? Bow? Or perhaps kiss each cheek twice? What are the social graces that are unique to the place? (In Japan, it's customary, during a meal, to fill the drinking glasses of your companions and then wait for one of them to fill yours.)

It's useful – and personally rewarding – to experience different cultures. If you are in a foreign land, don't look for a restaurant that serves food from home; try the local fare. Watch some local TV; you might not speak the language, but

you'll glean a lot from the pictures and the presentation, and you might even pick up a word or two that will impress your hosts. If you have time, attend a cultural or sporting event. Venture beyond your hotel and do a little shopping in the marketplace. Get a haircut. Every new transaction will teach you something about the culture you're dealing in.

I've also learned to find out a bit about the local history, culture and current politics. It's useful to know who the president or prime minister is, when the next election will take place, who the political parties are – whatever is germane to the particular nation in which you are doing business. These might seem like small matters, but getting them wrong can start you off on the wrong foot, while making the effort to get them right will help you put your best foot forward.

These gestures are helpful not just in dealing with the people on the other side of the conference table, but on your side, too, because you will likely employ people who live in the country where you're doing business. Your workforce might range from a single assistant/translator to an entire branch office. Whatever the size of the team, you'll find that its members can help you learn the local customs, and you'll likely win their loyalty and respect when you show them you take their culture seriously.

When I think back to the American–Japanese deal that fell through, I return to my first hallmark of leadership: openness. As our reach out into the world expands and international exchanges proliferate, this quality will become all the more important. Openness to listen to the team you are leading, openness to your colleagues across the negotiating table, openness to the country you've flown across the globe to do business in – all will be vital to your success. LINO's might think they can stay closeted in their offices and wing it; leaders – true leaders, that is – know there's no margin in it.



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