

“So, I Want You to Lead...”: Advice to a New Leader

Just over two decades ago, Bill Dickson, then MIT’s senior vice-president, asked me to talk with him about computing. Three conversations later, he asked me to lead MIT’s central computing activities: computing services, data center operations, administrative computing, and soon, telephone services. Back then, MIT had no computer network; its computing environment included some four or five mainframes providing batch and time-sharing services, plus fewer than one hundred minicomputers.

I told Bill “yes.” I had previously held senior leadership responsibilities at MIT and knew the technology reasonably well; those competencies, I thought, would be enough. But I know now that when I took the job, I lacked a key skill: the competency to lead. As retirement nears, I find myself reflecting more and more on what I’ve learned about being a leader—particularly in an arena driven by rapidly changing technology—and what I wish I had known much earlier. I want to share some of those reflections.

Being a competent leader requires that you have the skills and knowledge to reach your goals. Assuming that this means technological skills and knowledge, for years we have appointed some of our best technologists to technology leadership positions. But like me two decades ago, many of these people have toolkits that are incomplete. Their tools focus too much on the content of the work, which of course is essential, and far too little on what leaders do and how they do it. As I near the next phase of my career, I think of my leadership in terms of

who I am (*be*), what I know and can do (*do*), and what I need to know in order to continue to be effective (*learn*). These three touchstones—*be, do, learn*—frame what I know about leadership.

Be

I remember watching my maternal grandfather one day in the late 1940s, when I was staying at his house for the summer. He was the foreman of a crew that maintained a stretch of the Southern Pacific’s railroad track north of Houston. One job for the crew that particular day was shoveling out the outhouses at my grandfather’s house, at the houses of the section hands, and at the train station. My grandfather was shoveling, side by side with the section hands. “Why?” I asked him later. After all, he was the boss, and it was awful, messy, smelly work. I’ll never forget his answer: “Don’t ask anyone to do what you are unwilling to do yourself!” For me, these words are an enduring example of leadership—being authentic, being credible, and being able to value the dignity of those who work with you.

To be an effective leader, you must have character. Who are you? What are your values? What is your worldview? Followers want leaders who are credible, leaders who do what they say they will do. Max De Pree, the former CEO of Herman Miller Inc., wrote in his book *Leadership Jazz*: “Followers cannot afford leaders who make casual promises; someone may take them seriously!”¹ In a similar vein, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, in their book *Credibility*, noted: “When a leader

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makes promises, people instinctively do a credit check. The last time this person made such a promise, was he being honest about it?”²

Followers also expect their leaders to be open, honest, and ethical. Ultimately, followers expect leaders to focus their energy and ambition on expanding

the greatness of the work, on advancing the organization, and on helping the workers who serve with them, rather than on promoting themselves, on building their reputations, and on stroking their egos.

Do

The second of my leadership touchstones is what you know and do. After some three decades, I’ve come to believe that the leader’s work most often focuses on two fundamental sets of tasks: coping with operational complexity and coping with change. Both involve deciding what needs to be done, developing the capacity to get it done, and ensuring that it is done.

King Solomon wrote, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18). In today’s world, where there is no vision, organizations perish. Coping with operational complexity and change begins by developing and keeping to a vision, making that vision real with goals and plans, and aggressively communicating the vision, the goals, and the plan to staff and customers. To be successful, staff must be aligned to the vision and motivated to achieve the goals. The leader must be deeply involved at all levels in the *doing* that will achieve the vision, whether by removing obstacles, monitoring results,

holding staff accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities, or solving problems that delay success.

This work is hard for the leader. It requires deep knowledge and skill. However, knowledge and skills are perishable. Much of the knowledge and skill acquired today will not adequately equip a leader for tomorrow.

Learn

To lead effectively, you must face each day as an active learner. De Pree wrote: "The rate of change today requires that each of us become a frantic learner. Leaders respond to change by learning something."³ One becomes a learner first by admitting "I don't know" and then by allocating time to learning. Learning has to be continuous, and it requires complete openness. For me, this has meant approaching each day as a learning opportunity. Every day, I have had to learn about technology, about organizations, and about people—including myself.

When I assumed responsibility for computing at MIT, the dominant prefix was "kilo": kilohertz clock speeds, kilobytes of memory. We've moved progressively through "mega" to arrive at "giga," and now "tera" is within sight. The laptop on which I write has a clock speed of one gigahertz, a gigabyte of RAM, and a performance improvement of about 40,000 over the machines I used two decades ago. The principle behind these vast increases in performance is Moore's law, which states that the capability of silicon-based devices doubles every twelve to eighteen months. Since Moore's law is likely to remain valid for the next decade or so, leaders who do not learn about new technology and its capabilities are ill prepared to lead the deployment of new technology to address the needs of their organizations. The possibilities will simply not be visible to them.

Being a leader also means getting the most out of your organization. To do this, you need to understand the workings of the organization and how to develop its capabilities, how to organize to increase effectiveness, how to make the culture work, and how to reshape the culture when it doesn't work. A leader needs to learn how to manage meetings and lead projects, how to hold teams and individu-

als accountable, and how to view each situation through multiple lenses—for example, John Van Maanen's strategic design, political, and cultural lens⁴ or through the eyes of the customer. Without these tools in the toolkit, the leader will be severely hampered.

It has often been said that the hardest part of leadership is the people part. This part includes learning about yourself. What are your values? What are your dreams? Where are you taking the organization? Why? How do you challenge yourself and your staff to deliver the very best? How do you lead your staff to execute the plan?⁵ How do you help staff hold themselves accountable? How do you give, receive, and act on feedback effectively?⁶ A leader needs to understand that serving customers is at least as much about being polite and responsive to the customer as it is about getting the technical details right.



Given the importance of information technology to the higher education institution and its mission, effective leadership of technology is absolutely necessary for success. Over the years, the discipline provided by the three touchstones of *be, do, and learn* has served me extremely well. I commend them to anyone who wants to be a leader.

Notes

1. Max De Pree, *Leadership Jazz* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1992), 19.
2. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 23.
3. De Pree, *Leadership Jazz*, 84.
4. See Deborah Ancona, Thomas Kochan, Maureen Scully, John Van Maanen, and Eleanor Westney, *Managing for the Future: Organizational Behavior and Processes*, 2d ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: South Western College Publishing, 1999), module 2.
5. Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* (New York: Crown Business, 2002).
6. Joe Folkman, *Making Feedback Work: Turning Feedback from Employee Surveys into Change* (Provo, Utah: Novations Group, 1998).

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