

Research Report



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Basic Leadership Moves

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Effective leaders know and use a remarkably small set of fundamental skills. In fact, these skills are so fundamental that they may be more appropriately referred to as moves—as in dance moves, chess moves, or, for that matter, magic moves. The skills they use are not complete in and of themselves; it's only through adroit combination that they become apparent. In this paper, we describe basic leadership moves and offer insights on how they can be mastered through practice.

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Basic Leadership Moves*

Imagine the following position advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal*:

Wanted: Individual with the skill to be a coach, teacher, cheerleader, hero, visionary, steward, designer, artist, conductor, figurehead, and sensitive, caring human being, as circumstances (financial and interpersonal) demand. Must have demonstrated mastery of the Seven Habits and the Five Disciplines and proficiency in making Culture Change. Intense personal commitment to our mission and our people is essential; however, candidates must also be able to stand apart in order to give (and receive) an objective account of reality.

The job description is so daunting that there is little wonder that we hear so often about the shortage of leadership in the business enterprise.

However, close observation (and a close reading of recent literature) suggests that effective leaders know and use a remarkably small set of fundamental skills. In fact, these skills are so fundamental that they may be more appropriately referred to as *moves*—as in dance moves, chess moves, or, for that matter, magic moves. In other words, the skills they use are not complete in and of themselves; it is only through adroit combination that they become effective.

Let me propose five basic leadership moves:

Seeing

Effective leaders are highly perceptive. They see things others do not see—the possibilities as well as the realities. They see the unseen because they do not limit themselves to a single perspective. They see from their own perspective but they also seek to understand the perspective of others, e.g., those whom they hope to lead. Heightened perception derives in large measure from an awareness of the sources of bias and distortion that color what they and others see (and hear). In other words, leaders know what they value and they understand how values influence perception (their own as well as others'). Seeing as a basic leadership move encompasses what has been referred to over the years as active or

empathic listening, the ability to take on the role of the "other", and what Senge has most recently referred to as "mental models" or the ability to distinguish what is from what we desire.

Seeing Yourself

Leaders assume, negotiate or have thrust upon them many different roles. In order to assess those situations and to have the widest possible array of options at hand, effective leaders are both "insiders" (i.e., a sincere, committed participant) and "outsiders" (i.e., capable of stepping outside of a situation or a role to assess the range of possible actions available). In other words, effective leaders learn to monitor themselves in action and review, critique and amend their behavior in real time. One senior executive put it simply:

Someone once told me that I had a tremendous effect on people just by the way I talked. So, I started consciously stepping back and trying to see myself as others saw me. It was pretty sobering. I was a real bear at times...and a bore at others. And, by paying attention to myself I began to have a better understanding of the consequences of my behavior. The more I practiced, the easier and more unconscious it became. Now I just routinely find myself looking over my own shoulder to check on how I am behaving and what effect I am having.

With practice, self-awareness becomes less mechanical and more natural, and emerges as a basic leadership move.

Working with Values

Since they strive to understand the role values play in perception (their own and others'), effective leaders are comfortable with values. They understand and enact their own values, help others articulate what they value, deal straightforwardly with value conflicts and make value-based decisions. They do not shy away from conversations about values and they do not limit the enactment of values to the drafting of value statements. A highly successful CEO observed that:

Once I took on this job I realized that values were the glue that held this company together. We have lots of ways to generate and evaluate facts, but in the end we have to worry as much about doing the proper thing as we do about doing the right thing. Those are not always the same and part of my job is being able to tell the difference between the two.

Perhaps surprisingly, the ability to work with values is not something we routinely associate with leadership. We may expect leaders to have values, but we generally do not expect them to be skillful at working with values. Yet, it is hard to imagine leadership without values.

Trusting

Effective leaders know how to trust and how to be trusted. A senior manufacturing executive trained in the tools of TQM and an ardent advocate of fact-based management made very clear that faithful and accurate reporting of facts was impossible without high levels of trust:

For the first time, people find that they have no choice but to trust the numbers they are given. In the past, they would ignore someone else's numbers or learnings because they did not or could not or would not trust someone else's numbers. Fact-based management only works if you trust the facts someone else has given you.

In other words, trust is not just a word laminated in plastic. It is both an activity and an outcome—a precondition and a result—a move deeply ingrained in the practice of leadership.

Challenging

Effective leaders pursue the creation of goals and objectives as part of a dialogue, a collaborative process through which possibilities are revealed rather than imposed. They continually question norms and assumptions in an effort to remove unnecessary and unreal limits on the people and the organizations they lead. However, challenge need not take the form of confrontation or theatrical oratory. Indeed, highly effective leaders often evoke new ideas from the people they lead, rather than invent them. But whether they challenge by provocation or evocation, effective leaders find ways to invite people out of the circumstances and mindsets that constrain them.

Reflecting on the attributes of the leader he most admired, a former Fortune 50 CEO recalled that, "he rarely raised his voice or pounded the desk. He would lead by asking questions. He often did not know the answers. But, by asking he invited us to help him find them."

Leadership, Magic and Golf

The notion of "moves" makes it possible to take leadership out of the realm of the mysterious and the mystical (or genetic) and to see it as analogous to many other complex activities. Take magic, for example. Most complicated magical effects are little more than the artful combination of a finite number of basic moves (e.g., misdirection, feint, switch, etc.). A magical effect or trick may capture the audience's attention and elicit awe, but the effect is really just a combination of moves. Likewise, golf, tennis, chess and ballet build from (and upon) a handful of basic moves.

Cast this way, leadership becomes something that one can learn and improve through practice. Not everyone has the dexterity, the drive or the desire to be a great golfer or a great leader. A certain amount of each is essential to mastering the underlying moves. On the other hand, a golf swing is not a purely genetic trait and neither is the ability to lead. The things we desire to learn, we learn to the extent of our abilities, and the things we learn can be improved through dedicated practice.

Of course, leadership, magic, and golf are not identical. One would like to believe that leaders grapple with reality more often than illusion, for example. But, like magicians and golf pros, leaders achieve virtuosity by practicing the underlying moves of their chosen pursuit. Practice and performance may be separated in time, but the two are not separated in concept: performance is a form of practice (with an audience watching), and practice is a form of performance (without the audience).

Practicing the Basic Moves

These ideas about leadership were derived from practice, not just from theory or observation. Five years of intense collaboration between industry executives, faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and students (most with four to five years work experience) resulted in the creation of a process for learning leadership founded on the premise that practice has to be intimately connected to the day-to-day experience of leadership. That process has subsequently been validated in work with executives in the automobile, electronics and metals industries.

The key to mastering a leadership move is practice—not lengthy off-site executive retreats or boxed audio cassettes. Special events and tools have their uses, but since most leaders see themselves as engaged in continuous performance, it is generally not possible to schedule practice "after hours." Practice, therefore, has to be woven into performance.

Most of us know how to perform while practicing—we sing to imaginary (and adoring) audiences in the shower, invent crowds who clap in awe at our drives off a practice tee and deliver stirring speeches in the privacy of a closed office. However, how do you practice in the midst of performance?

The key to practicing in the midst of performance is to identify where opportunities exist—or could be created—in the context of everyday performance and make them your practice field. Make yourself acutely aware of situations where you can practice seeing, seeing yourself, working with values, trusting, and challenging. I offer some examples below, but these are only a small fraction of the ways that men and women I have worked with have found to practice their leadership moves. What is critical in each case is that you practice and that you are mindful of what you are doing and seeing as you do it.

- **Seeing:** Go to a meeting (best if it is not one you are chairing) and observe how people behave in meetings. Take notes if you like, but once you are away from the meeting, write down all you can remember. Do not limit yourself to the traditional minutes of the meeting; try to recreate the words, gestures, ambiance, intimations, body language and history that enable you to understand what was going on. The goal here is not to remember everything, but to gain insight into what you remember and why.
- **Seeing Yourself:** Ask someone you know reasonably well to videotape you as you make a presentation or speech. Firmly instruct them that you want them to picture you as they normally see you. No staging or props. Resist the temptation

to stop and restart in order to get the best image. Just keep the camera going for twenty minutes or so. Then, have that someone videotape you for an equal length of time doing what it is you happen to be doing, e.g., reading, eating, conversing, working, etc. Rewind the tape and watch yourself in action. What do you see that surprises you? What do you see that you like or dislike and why? Alternatively, practice "watching yourself over your own shoulder."

- **Working with Values:** With a friend or co-worker, strike up a conversation about passion. Talk about something about which you have a passion and encourage your companion to do the same. Listen to what they say and, more importantly, listen to how they say it. What happens when someone talks about something they feel passionate about? Then, in other situations, look for signs of passion, e.g., indications you recognize that someone cares deeply about something. Alternatively, make a list of the things you value. Then ponder how you express the importance of these things in your daily life.
- **Trusting:** At the end of the day, stop for a moment and think about all the agreements, commitments, obligations and promises you made that day. The first time you do this, actually list them on a piece of paper. The list should include not only the items that might be on your "to do" list, but the more subtle agreements that you enter into, as well. For example, when someone buys you lunch or just a cup of coffee, is there an implicit obligation incurred? How many commitments do you make in a given day? How many do you plan to keep? What is the cost of not fulfilling them, or of having them made to you but left unfulfilled?
- **Challenging:** Practice finding solutions in unlikely places. Ponder this simple idea: "No matter how difficult or vexing a problem you may be facing, someone somewhere has already devised a solution to a similar problem. Your job is to find that someone." First, step back and consider some of the general features of a problem you are trying to solve. What is it like if you look at it from a distance? Then, from that distance, look around to see what other kinds of people or organizations might have the same problem. How might they have already solved your problem? For example, when trying to understand what leaders do to improve their ability to lead, it helps to step back and consider some general features of what leaders do and then to look around and see what other kinds of people or organizations have done—e.g., golfers, magicians, dancers and chessmasters.

Practicing as a Leadership Team

How can a leadership team practice the basic moves? This question arises more and more commonly as organizations seek to work and lead in teams. In a recent assignment with a senior management team, we addressed the issue by using real, focused business issues as the context for practice. For example, the top management team in a highly profitable equipment manufacturer admitted to having difficulty resolving problems that cut across functional domains. When such problems occurred, the group would sweep them under the rug, find a scapegoat or dissolve into disagreement. However, they also recognized that cross-functional problems were likely to increase in number and that they, as leaders, had to demonstrate workable methods for resolving them.

Together with the top divisional executive, we targeted a particularly complex problem (i.e., costly production disruptions resulting from breakdowns in a key supplier) as a practice field. We used that problem to practice several of the basic moves, particularly seeing (what counts as data in this situation? how does the source of the information affect our willingness to believe the information?), seeing yourself (by periodically intervening in the discussion, we were able to draw attention to how the media—words, images and body language—were affecting the message), and challenging (pushing back the boundaries of comparison to find situations where similar problems had been encountered and solved). The key was to establish a constructive inquiry—an opportunity for what our colleagues Bryan Smith and Charlie Kiefer call "productive conversation."

In this instance, there were three important outcomes: (1) a solution to the problem they had been grappling with; (2) practice (and progress) with basic skills that would enable the team to lead more effectively; and (3) the experience of a "successful practice" which gave team members the desire to look for more opportunities to practice. To wit: performance and practice had been reunited.

Conclusion

The proof of effective leadership ultimately rests in the production of results (e.g., battles won, obstacles overcome, records set, etc.). However, it is important to recognize that we are not likely to learn all we need to know about winning battles, overcoming obstacles, or setting records by focusing only on the moment of victory. We must learn to appreciate the various elements of practice that lead up to, enable or increase

the odds of success. These elements—which I have referred to here as leadership moves—are usually not visible in the moment of success. Moreover, unless we are disciplined, we are extremely unlikely to look for those elements in the aftermath of failure.

Every theory of leadership has its three or five or seven basic principles. On the surface, the approach I have described here is no different. However, what I refer to as basic leadership moves have no value in isolation: simple repetition or mimicry will not make one a leader. On the one hand, leadership moves are exercises (like finger exercises for card tricks and piano-playing) that can improve an individual's performance as a leader. On the other hand, they are much more: a set of insights into the way that leadership can become a way of life.

Notes:

- * This article has been previously published in "Prism," March 1996 under the title: "Practicing Leadership: Mastering the Basic Moves."

About the Author

Robert J. Thomas is a Senior Research Fellow at the Accenture Institute for Strategic Change. His work focuses on leadership and organizational change. His most recent book entitled *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders* was published by Harvard Business School Press in 2002. He can be reached at 1+ 617 454-8682 or robert.j.thomas@accenture.com.

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The Accenture Institute for Strategic Change was founded in 1996 and conducts original research focused on business innovation. Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Institute consists of management researchers working collaboratively with executives and other researchers to bring innovative and actionable ideas to decision-makers.

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A pair of glasses is placed over a document. The document features a graph titled 'Fig. 2: economy model' with a y-axis labeled 'Number of new buyers' and an x-axis labeled 'Time'. The graph is divided into segments for 'Innovators', 'Early adopters', 'Majority', and 'Laggards'. Below the graph, there are arrows pointing to the right, and the text 'Number of word users' is visible. To the right of the glasses, there is a paragraph of text discussing product life cycles and innovation.

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