

Leading with Love

By Laura A. Davis

Everyone loves a good story. Great leaders are aware of this and inspire others to own and share their own unique and special story. They help us to see how our narrative fits into the whole to make a difference. Corporate employees rarely go to work each day pondering the CEO's vision or Wall Street's valuation of their company if they work for a corporation. Few people think about the owner's vision if they work in a store or any establishment created by someone else. Ideally, we "go to work" to make a living as well as a life. We all want to express our gifts and talents in a healthy work environment even in nontraditional venues.

Once survival needs are met at varying levels, each individual wants to freely and fully express who they are through what they do. We all desire to have a say in creating our own storyline out of the circumstances and events of our lives. Of course, we all want to recognize who we really are as observers and witnesses to our stories. Yet from a higher level of being, we are here to play out our roles and enjoy the plot.

Reflecting on my own story, I've come to a few conclusions and have made some observations that might be helpful to anyone in a leadership role. You may or may not see yourself in that light right now. I believe leadership potential lies within all of us. How do you know if you are a leader? The best litmus test is simple. Is anyone following you? You don't have to have a lofty position to be a role model. You can be the light at any level of any hierarchy in any organization. If people want what you are offering, you are doing something that has an impact.

On your way to becoming a more effective, inspiring leader, here are some pearls I've gleaned from my own experience as well as from watching others whom I admire. It comes down to LOVE. And love makes a great acronym for what I want to express. People want to feel your heart and know that you care about what you do and about them. This doesn't mean you need to be overly nice or enthusiastic all of the time. Here are 4 observations to consider:

L stands for lens. Everyone sees the world through their unique lens based upon their story. We have the story of our family of origin, our birth order, our culture, our beliefs and values and upbringing. There are many factors which shape and influence our perspective on life too numerous to mention here. We have an interpretation of how life has touched us until we become aware that this interpretation or story may or may not serve us. I used to listen to someone's advice, complaint or interpretation of an event/circumstance without discerning how valid it was for me or for the present need. If we can discern where someone is coming from based upon *their* personal history, this can help us to see past their filters into what is best in this

moment. One of the first things I request of a new coaching client is a life story of significant events and turning points in their lives. It helps me to see the values and beliefs which have informed their choices in the creation of their present reality.

O stands for originality. Leaders let each person's light shine and assist in assigning or allowing roles and responsibilities where individuals can fulfill their need to create, contribute, and express their unique strengths and talents. Notice I said assist and not dictate. Some people know at an early age where they'd like to play. More often than not, people go into a particular career or line of work because of what their parents, teachers, or peers think is best based upon external factors including their own unrealized dreams or the state of the economy. If you ask most people what their unique gifts and talents are, they will respond with what they can't or don't do well. In the past, many people didn't even ask themselves the questions of "who am I?" and "what is my purpose?" This is changing dramatically in our modern world out of necessity. You can facilitate this awakening.

Ask them their story. You might ask: What did you love to do as a child? What were you drawn to and why? What did you receive praise for without effort? Owning our greatness is often a challenge. One tool I use is Marston's DiSC model. Some people naturally know how to create a sense of urgency and get results, others naturally know how to connect with anyone at any time in a personal way. Some people are natural listeners and process creators, while others are naturally gifted at research, factual precision and diplomacy. When one knows how to interpret the language of DiSC deeply from a spiritual lens, it can be a powerful tool for leadership development and organizational transformation. I'm a bridge-builder and translator of talents. DiSC, when interpreted fully, provides a scientifically-validated way to bring spiritual principles into the everyday language of business.

With this and other tools, one can assist people in recognizing the patterns in their story regarding threads of strengths, talents and areas for growth. We can begin to chart a roadmap with consistent signposts with many variables around the main plot. Even more importantly, one can teach people how to understand and appreciate the talents and challenges inherent in other people. With that understanding, we can begin to find acceptance on our way to appreciation and celebration of our differences.

We all come into this world as an original. No one wants to leave it as a copy. Whose life are you living? I remember working for a series of large companies, commuting to work, driving a car that I had inherited from my father and wondering whose life this was that I was inhabiting. In my experience, many people reach their mid 30's and begin to question the choices they've made in their past with less consciousness. I believe you can love what you do for a living and design a life that includes passionate self-expression. People follow those who are inspired by what they love and believe in. No one is inspired by just the facts on a Power Point slide. We might be convinced but we are rarely moved by data alone.

V stands for vision. Remember that leaders have followers or at least people who want what you have to offer. Vision implies clear sight and looking ahead on down the road. Vision also inspires passion. If you don't have a long-term perspective and some idea of where you're going, why would anyone want to follow you? Take a long-term perspective while being in the now.

E stands for empowerment. Empowerment, vision and for that matter love, are words that are bandied about. What I mean by empowerment is creating an environment with the appropriate balance of challenge and support. One of the challenges in organizational life is the gap between where the leadership team's current reality is and what the current reality of the front line tends to be. There seems to be a pervasive belief held by both camps that neither camp has the best interests of the other at heart.

My coaching clients initially say that the senior leadership of their company doesn't care about them and only seeks to take or get time, energy, and work from them. In some cases, this is valid. On the side of the same coin, I will hear those at the top of the "chain of command" say that employees don't seem to care anymore and are only interested in a paycheck. This is true for some people. Where you stand depends upon where you sit and yet bridges can be constructed across the void.

What a successful leader brings to the table is a firm belief in the desire of individuals to fulfill themselves through expressing their talents. They recognize that people are individuals first who are then connected through relationships which create value for customers and for employees. There is a direct relationship between employee and customer satisfaction. If leaders can convey their genuine, authentic desire to have their employees feel fulfilled and creative in their work, the will to be fully engaged takes care of itself.

It is as if the leader creates a force field around them. They create a petri-dish-like environment in which only a positive culture can live. There still can be misunderstandings and break-downs in communication. There still may be performance issues. Yet, communication and conflict resolution skills and performance issues can be addressed if there is willingness and not just compliance. Skills can be taught and have a chance of being implemented if this attitude of caring exists.

Leaders go forth and love.