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Helping you align your people with your vision



Three Leader Behaviors for Maximum Impact

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

This morning began like others—I woke at my usual 5 a.m. and decided that a good way to start the day was to go for a walk. The sun was already up here in Omak, Washington, Okanogan County, where the Omak Stampede Rodeo and “World Famous Suicide Race” happen each August...

For my urban friends, I’m literally *inthemiddleofnowhere* up near the Canadian border and I had to drive 4 hours to get here through two mountain passes because there’s no other way unless I owned my own helicopter, which I don’t. I walked until the sidewalk ran out, which means most of my walk was along the highway next to the ditch where baby sagebrush is growing, green and fragrant, and it’s too early and cool at this hour for the rattle snakes to be out. I listen to *Talking Timbuktu* on my iPod, rhythmic African music and wonder what it might be like to watch the sun come up on the Savannah.

Last week, I was hanging out on Paradise Island in the Bahamas, half-way across the world from here and the vista included cerulean waters, crystal-clear skies, and white sandy beaches. Just like the postcards. *Exactly*. I am struck this morning by how walking in the desert can be just like snorkeling on coral reefs, and before you think I’ve completely lost it from all this flying around the globe and breathing too much recycled airplane air, think about this: at first, when you look out at the desert

landscape, like here in Omak, you might think *there’s nothing there—so desolate and brown with a bit of green here and there* and you might think of other deserts you’ve seen—in Arizona or Mexico—where the sand stretches out against the sky and if you’re lucky there’s a lovely red plateau in the distance, but if not, it’s just sand and sky and sand and sky as far as you can see.

Except, like when snorkeling, you take the time to be still and stop and really look, you can begin to see a myriad of textures, colors, shapes, tiny animals, bugs, perfect flowers, like the orange flash of an ocotillo bloom or the lilies that only show up every few years. In the Bahamas, if I was willing to float, surrender myself to salt water, breathe evenly and slowly, and just watch, the whole reef came alive: lovely red sea grass, purple fronds, a flash of blue fish here, yellow fish there, the whole pulsing universe of the coral reef—including a curious barracuda and the funny faces of clown fish.

Before you think I’m going to draw a parallel between the funny faces of clown fish and your employees or coworkers, hear me out: as I look for leadership lessons to share with clients and friends, I’m always thinking of ways to help them be more effective, more efficient, and better able to lead. Sometimes the things that are missing from effective leader behaviors seem so subtle, so obviously-related-to-common sense that many leaders dismiss these behaviors as minor and therefore less valuable than other leader behaviors—like making sure to set a clear vision and strategy or hiring the right people—and so they quickly rush by with bigger things on their minds. I’m gonna make you crazy here with this important tip: *slow down*. I know it seems counter-intuitive, I

know you've spent a lot of time on the way to and from somewhere thinking about the seven things you must do next and how you can do them more quickly, and wouldn't it be great, really, if there weren't any *people* in the way, making you less efficient?

You don't need a set of great binoculars or a fancy snorkel mask to do the following, but the payoffs, the Return on Investment (ROI), will be huge:

Presence: You need to show up, and you especially need to show up if you're not always in close proximity to those whom you are leading. I can't give you a magic formula, and if they're an hour away, an office away, or across the globe, you'll have to get creative in terms of how it happens, but you need to show up and be present with the people you lead. This is about quality, not quantity, but make sure the quantity isn't zero! Many, many leaders have said to me, "well, I have an 'open door' policy," which suggests that employees can come by or call anytime to ask a question, offer an idea, or get support. That's great, but it's not enough. It's not enough. You have to take the initiative and simply be present—go to where they work, ride along to see clients or take a call, have a cup of coffee or lunch. Show up even if you don't have an issue, problem or specific purpose. In fact, the purpose is to be present.

Engagement: Here's a big tip for how to maximize your leadership relationship: be absolutely, fully engaged in the moment. I'm not leading you to a Zen koan, I'm talking about how we're all guilty of trying to multi-task (which is nearly impossible anyway) and we might show up, or call, or schedule an appointment with our employees, but we're somewhere else mentally and emotionally. If I am able to give you a full 15-30 minutes of my time without distractions, without my cell phone or computer, and I really listen to you, what's that worth? Think about the phrase "to pay attention"—I was surprised to find when I consulted my Oxford English Dictionary (OED) that the first definition of pay has nothing to do with money but rather to do with contentment and satisfaction, as in we pay out (verb) and we receive pay (noun) in exchange for something else. The important thing to note here about

engagement, about focus and paying attention to someone fully, is about investing yourself, your time and energy in another person, and when this person is your employee or coworker, you can either spend wisely or you can be wasteful.

Response: If I show up and be present, and then I'm willing to pay out my attention by being fully engaged for the time I'm with you, the last simple element is to be willing to respond. This can include listening and responding on the spot, or it might mean that I will need to follow-through or follow-up on what we've talked about or what you've shared. I can't tell you how many times someone will tell me that their leaders did ask for feedback or ideas, or acted like they were listening, finally, only to be encouraging and create hope, but then "nothing changed" or "nothing happened." Honestly, you almost do more damage to your credibility by fostering hope and then not following up than you would if you never asked or listened in the first place—they're counting on you for some kind of response.

Each morning, even before I'm fully awake, I say to myself: "I intend to live my life on purpose." Sometimes I even say it out loud. It means that I will strive to emerge into the day and be conscious, aware, engaged and purposeful in my actions and interactions, purposeful in my work and in my play. Lately, I've been thinking about giving up the subtext I've probably been thinking for a long time: "I intend to live my life on perfect," which, if I'm honest, has probably driven me, sustained me and propelled me to obtain many of my goals and realize many of my dreams. The thing that's tough to admit, and I think this is true for many leaders, is that it may have indeed moved me, but perhaps not always moved me forward. I'll be the first person to extol the virtues of setting goals, identifying outcomes and there's no one who loves a list to cross off better than I do—but how can I be fully engaged, fully focused, if I'm not taking time to slow down, look around, notice the intricacies of the desert or the way the reef is suddenly, exponentially alive? How can I expect to lead others if I'm always rushing past at break-neck speed, four steps ahead of myself and six steps ahead of them? Why would anyone want to follow me to that crazy place? You do not have to be perfect; sometimes you just need to show up, be fully present and take notice. Often, that's more than enough. ❖

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