

# Reflections on Leadership

by Carol A. Campbell, DBA, RHIA, FAHIMA

## Abstract

Webster's dictionary offers numerous synonyms and related words for the word *lead*; the list includes words such as *chief, commanding, first, foremost, high, preeminent, controlling, directing, reigning, sovereign, and superior*. Some individuals (perhaps too many) in positions of authority rely very heavily on characteristics associated with these terms. Abusive leaders exploit their power and "lead" through intimidation and their ability to withhold rewards and distribute punishment. This article explores why some people are bad bosses and suggests six obligations of leaders who aspire to fulfilling the role of leadership done right.

**Key words:** Bad bosses, leadership, ethically centered, diplomatic, assertive, relevancy, elucidation, listening.

## Scenario

It was 8:15 a.m.; the laptop computer had finished chugging its way through the start-up process. With cyber connection secured, Professor L. Gulliver logged into Nirvana Lagado University's e-mail system. Scrolling quickly through the list of 55 new e-mails, Professor Gulliver deduced from the subject headings that 44 of the new messages were "requests" for the "Dear" professor to complete a "brief" survey. Thirty-five of the survey requests were from internal senders with leadership titles such as vice dean, senior vice president, associate senior vice president, executive director, and so on. The remaining nine requests triggered the university's e-mail system to flag them as potential spam, even though several of the senders had e-mail extensions of *.edu*. After opening the surveys sent by Nirvana Lagado University leaders, it became readily apparent to Professor Gulliver that the surveys were similarly themed (for the 10th time in 13 consecutive months). The university, it seemed, was intent on gathering as much data as possible regarding faculty, staff, and student perceptions of the "effectiveness of its leadership," "values important to institutional success," "recommended revisions to the mission statement," "strategic initiatives for the next seven years," and so forth. Nirvana indeed.

## Uncovering Bad Bosses

The satirical scenario described above provides many opportunities to explore the imperatives of leadership done right. Although the scene is set in academia, L. Gulliver could just as easily be any beleaguered employee in corporate America. The fact that Scott Adams, creator of the popular Dilbert cartoon, hasn't run out of fodder for his series is a layperson's proof that Professor Gulliver has lots of company. The purpose of this article is to deconstruct the phenomenon of why there are so many bad leaders despite the insights of management gurus (such as Peter Drucker and John Gardner) that point to a better way. This article includes suggestions on how those in positions of authority (or those aspiring to be similarly situated) can improve the leadership "score" they might receive from the Professor Gullivers of the world.

So, how do you know if you're a bad leader? Well, as Bill Engvall would say, "Here's your sign":

- The conversation among your direct reports stops when you enter the room.
- In your view, the words *flexibility* and *indecision* are synonyms.
- You consider dissent as solid evidence that your employees are disloyal yahoos.
- When you talk about improving productivity, you are not referring to yourself.
- You include all your credentials and titles after your name when sending out informal e-mails.
- The only way to get "the team" to come to the annual holiday party is to make attendance mandatory.

If these indicators seem to fit a bit too well, perhaps Bill Williams's observation that "the most challenging part of being a boss is that nobody will tell you if your work is suffering" will ease your pain. The curious thing, though, is that all those surveys *can* provide valuable insight regarding the views of subordinates and the health of their morale. But how well information collected via surveys informs leadership has a lot to do with leaders' receptiveness to feedback that may not match their personal views; another "sign" that someone might be a bad boss is resentment of negative feedback. A bad boss disregards any negative feedback as cheap shots from disgruntled employees who just "don't get it." Worse yet, some bad bosses use surveys as a means of identifying their next target. Bad bosses who manipulate information in this manner unwittingly reveal their insecurities (typically stemming from incompetence); their unspoken "leadership" approach can be described as something like "the beatings will stop as soon as there is an improvement in morale."

A 2009 opinion piece published on the ABC News website entitled "Why Is Your Boss a Bully?" reports that "new research shows that personal power, coupled with a feeling of inadequacy, is a potent force that can make a boss pick on those with less power. The problem, according to research based on interviews with more than 400 persons, is that deep down inside, the lout knows he or she is a loser."<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the article, researcher Serena Chen, associate professor of psychology at the University of California, states: "It's the combination of having a high-power role and fearing that one is not up to the task that causes power holders to lash out. Our data suggests it's ultimately about self-worth."

Peter Drucker tackled the issue of boss self-worth and its impact on organizational success in his 1999 article "Managing Oneself," which was republished in *Harvard Business Review* in 2005.<sup>2</sup> Drucker asserts that success in today's knowledge economy requires that people:

1. Know themselves,
2. Know what they are good at, and
3. Know how they best perform—especially in terms of how they perform in conjunction with others.

Drucker emphasizes that "organizations are no longer built on force but on trust." Additionally, he states, "The existence of trust between people does not mean they like one another. It means that they understand one another. Taking responsibility for relationships is therefore an absolute necessity. It is a duty."<sup>3</sup>

It takes a mature person to comprehend that "being liked" is not necessarily a prerequisite for being respected. Unfortunately, bad bosses get tangled up in the "being liked" emotion instead of focusing on the duties of leadership. Margaret Thatcher observed: "Being powerful is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren't."

## The Obligations of Leadership

What, then, are the imperatives of good leaders (bosses)? Six obligations of leaders are suggested as essential to leadership done right:

**L**—Listening

**E**—Ethically centered  
**A**—Assertive  
**D**—Diplomatic  
**E**—Elucidation  
**R**—Relevancy

**L** **Listening** is fundamental. Ineffective leaders are loud but rarely listen. Nonlistening leaders often misconstrue employees' way of expressing themselves as de facto evidence that the underlings are rebels without a valid cause, that is, the old "what we've got here is a failure to communicate" situation. When employees are viewed as rebels, it's no surprise that bad bosses think the only tool in the leader's toolbox is a stick.

**E** **Ethically centered** behavior and egocentric behavior are as distinctly different as day and night. As Serena Chen noted, self-worth deficits have an ugly way of being filled in by bad bosses. Ethically centered leaders realize that ethics demand ethical behavior all the time, not just when it's convenient. Daniel O'Connell summarized this imperative by stating: "Nothing is politically right which is morally wrong."

**A** **Assertive** representation of verified facts and sound decisions is a responsibility of leadership and is a far cry from confusing "flexibility" with "indecision." Appropriate assertiveness occurs when leaders have confidence in themselves and can distinguish between meaningful information and irrelevant, disconnected data. Shah, Horne, and Capella label this type of assertive leader as "informed skeptics." They found that the individuals best equipped to make good decisions are those who (1) balance judgment and analysis, (2) possess strong analytic skills, and (3) listen to others' opinions but are willing to dissent.<sup>4</sup>

**D** **Diplomatic** treatment of diverse opinions is a mark of effective leadership. Diplomacy's close cousin is patience in hearing out the views of others and resisting a rush to judgment before all relevant information is collected. Diplomatic leaders are able to convey their own views in a way that doesn't earn them the reputation of egomaniac. Diplomatic leaders understand exactly what Theodore Roosevelt meant when he said, "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care."

**E** **Elucidation** of organizational mission, goals, and individual objectives is necessary. General Colin Powell expressed it this way: "Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers."

**R** **Relevancy** of process and purpose vis-à-vis mission, goals, and objectives influences whether employees find credibility and authenticity in the orders issued by those in positions of power. In contrast, when Jonathan Swift's Lemuel Gulliver visited the Great Academy of Lagado (on the flying island of Laputa), the leaders were squandering resources on schemes such as extracting sunbeams from cucumbers, softening marble for use in pillows, learning how to mix paint by smell, and uncovering political conspiracies by examining the excrement of suspicious persons.

Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole made popular versions of the song "It's Only a Paper Moon" written by Harold Arlen. In it, the concluding mournful words are "It's a Barnum and Bailey world, just as phony as it can be. But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me." Leaders suffering from self-worth issues search for worth in surveys and then resent the results. The Gullivers and Dilberts find the workplace to be a Barnum and Bailey world and the need for leaders who believe in them perpetually unmet.

Perhaps what needs to happen to clean up this mess is for both leaders and followers to heed the words of Scottish author J. M. Barrie, who said, "Never ascribe to an opponent motives meaner than your own." Extending this idea, Stephen Covey pointed out: "We tend to judge others based on their behavior, and ours based on our intent. In almost all situations, we would do well to recognize the possibility—even the probability—of good intent in others . . . sometimes despite their observable behavior."<sup>5</sup>

But, just as soon as you think it might be safe to get back in the water, along comes the story of Isaac Newton as told by Stephen Hawking.<sup>6</sup> Although grade-school children are introduced to scientific principles through appealing stories such as that of Newton and the falling apple, Sir Isaac Newton had a dark side. As a reward for writing *Principia Mathematica*, Newton was appointed president of the British Royal Society and was eventually knighted. Even though Newton was a brilliant man in his own right, his

success was not independent of help from other brilliant mathematicians. John Flamsteed, a royal astronomer, had provided Newton with essential data for *Principia Mathematica*, but Newton deliberately failed to acknowledge Flamsteed's contribution. Newton behaved even more despicably toward Gottfried Leibniz. Although Newton's development of calculus preceded Leibniz's, Leibniz published his work first. Subsequently, a major tempest erupted in the press. Most of the articles defending Newton were written by Newton but published under the names of Newton's friends. Then Leibniz made a fatal error: he appealed to the Royal Society for an impartial hearing. Newton, however, appointed the panel, wrote the report, and had the society officially charge Leibniz with plagiarism. Still not satisfied, Newton also published an anonymous review in the Royal Society's journal supporting the findings and charges of the committee. Upon Leibniz's death, Newton declared he had found great satisfaction in breaking Leibniz's heart.

## Conclusion

It is not always possible to explain human behavior. It is especially difficult to understand why someone as brilliant as Sir Isaac Newton would choose to use his power not only to discredit a colleague but to also break his heart. Even though it nearly defies explanation, ethically centered people recognize the inhumanity of Newton's behavior; his actions in this regard are certainly not held up as the gold standard of leadership.

Individuals who seek leadership roles to satisfy a thirst for power would be well advised to consider the words of George Washington Carver, who said, "How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong; because someday in life you will have been all of these."

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## Notes

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