

Leaders Open Doors

*A Radically Simple Leadership Approach
to Lift People, Profits, and Performance*

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iUniverse, Inc.
Bloomington

LEADERS OPEN DOORS

A RADICALLY SIMPLE LEADERSHIP APPROACH TO LIFT PEOPLE, PROFITS, AND PERFORMANCE

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*ISBN: 978-1-4759-7636-6 (sc)
ISBN: 978-1-4759-7638-0 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-4759-7637-3 (e)*

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013903616

Printed in the United States of America

iUniverse rev. date: 3/6/2013

CHAPTER 2

Opportunity Focus

*Opportunity is more powerful even
than conquerors and prophets.*

—Benjamin Disraeli

Do you aim to be a problem-focused leader or an opportunity-focused leader?

Many work environments place a premium on leaders with critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Often, though, that premium places too much emphasis on being *critical* and dealing with *problems*. In such workplaces, leaders can become downers, always harping on what's wrong and what needs to be fixed. Such leaders often resort to stoking people's fears to motivate them to get things done. This fear-stoking is exemplified by one of the most overused phrases in the history of business: *What keeps me awake at night ...*

Think about it. When leaders talk about (or more often *brag* about) what keeps them awake at night, aren't they really just showcasing their fears and anxieties? It's as if some leaders believe that the only way they'll get any rest is to make the entire workforce share in their fears. Unless people are as afraid as they are, they think that no one will be motivated enough to address whatever is causing the leaders to lose sleep. Seriously, putting

people on the leader's twenty-four-hour fear cycle isn't motivating at all. Insomnia shouldn't be a leadership badge of honor.

Leaders would be better served to talk about what gets them up in the morning instead of what keeps them awake at night. Opportunity attracts and excites employees more than problems do. People want to follow leaders who have confidence in them and the opportunities that the future holds. People want to follow leaders who sleep soundly at night.

ARE YOU A SPILLER OR A FILLER?

Leaders generally fall into two broad categories: *spillers* and *fillers*. Spillers motivate people by stoking their fears. They view most situations as threats to be controlled and neutralized. When confronting a challenging situation, they immediately jump to the worst possible potential outcomes. By injecting you with fear and anxiety, they drain off your confidence and courage—hence the term “spiller.” Always expecting a catastrophe, spillers blow things way out of proportion. They say things like,

- You have a huge problem on your hands.
- Do you realize how much that puts us at risk?
- If you mess up, we'll all be in trouble.
- Do not, I repeat, *do not* make a mistake.

Fillers, conversely, motivate people by appealing to their innate desire to excel. Instead of playing not to lose, as spillers do, fillers play to win. They look at the same situation but look for opportunities to exploit, not threats to control. Instead of transmitting fear and anxiety, they give followers a fuller sense of confidence and excitement. They say things like,

- Hmm, this is a challenging situation ... and it's full of *opportunity*.
- Here's why I think you're the right person to take

on this challenge and why it would be good for your career growth.

- I have every confidence that you'll be successful, and here's the support you can expect from me ...
- What do *you* think? What should be our first steps?

Keep in mind that both fillers *and* spillers can get a good job out of you. For spillers, you may perform well because you know how much trouble you'll get into if you don't. For fillers, you'll perform well because they believe in you and you don't want to let them down.

But there is one consequential difference between working for a spiller and working for a filler. Fillers get deep loyalty from the people they lead. Spillers get deep resentments.

OPEN-DOOR LEADER EXAMPLES

Opportunities come in many forms. Sometimes they simply present themselves at an opportune moment. Other times they are intentionally created by the open-door leader. Here are some real-life examples:

- The owner of a respected construction company notices that one of the company's midlevel managers seems particularly skilled at building client relationships and winning work. At the same time, he is aware that there is no successor to the company's VP of business development, who is a few years away from retirement. He reassigns the manager to work directly with the VP with an eye toward his eventually becoming the VP's successor. The owner has the opportunity to fill a position with a qualified person, and the manager has the opportunity to grow into a position where he can excel.

WHY LEADING THROUGH FEAR IS CHEAP LEADERSHIP

If you're a parent, you know that using threats is an effective way of getting your children to do what you want them to do. Whether you're threatening to remove something your kids want or threatening to punish them for some naughty thing they're doing, fear works. I know. I've used it myself, even on my sweet five-year-old son, Ian. When he was going through his terrible twos and being disobedient, I would threaten to put on a Halloween mask that scared him to get him to be good. "Ian!" I'd bark. "Stop that right now or I'm going to put on the mask!" Though the Department of Social Services might not have approved of my scare tactics, they worked. All it took for me to quickly shift Ian from naughty to nice was the simple threat of a scary face.

Using fear to motivate people is cheap leadership. Any two-bit dictator can use fear to get things done. It takes no finesse or intelligence and ultimately works against the leader. The temporary spike in motivation from stoking people's fears is offset by the long-term impacts of deep resentment, performance-draining anxiety, and ill will. More evolved and thoughtful leaders choose to pull people toward the behaviors they want instead of pushing them from the behaviors they don't want. My wife, for example, uses a *compliment* system to promote good behavior with Ian, Alex, and Bina. Each time one of them finishes a chore, for example, they get to put a small stone (a "compliment") in a jar that's been set aside just for them. When they've gathered enough stones, they get a small reward, like dinner at Chuck E. Cheese.

If you want workers to act like adults, you have to lead like an adult. Instead of constantly drawing their attention to the bad things that will happen if they mess up, work with them to identify the actions and priorities that will increase their likelihood of succeeding. Remind them that taking on challenges is how leaders earn their merit badges at work. Be sure to also specify what rewards they can expect if they succeed—including the chance to be involved in more opportunities. Pulling people toward good

behavior instead of threatening them out of bad behavior is a healthier and more mature way of leading.

OPPORTUNITY ATTRACTS

Fear and excitement prompt the same neurological responses. Think for a moment about what happens to you, physiologically, when you are really, really afraid. Your heart races, your palms sweat, your breath gets faster and shorter, and your stomach teems with butterflies. Well, guess what? Those same physiological responses happen when you are going to have sex!

Fear and excitement are both high-arousal states. Though there are almost no neurological and physiological differences, there is one critical distinction between the conditions of fear and excitement. You experience fear as *displeasure*, and you experience excitement as *pleasure*. It follows that you move toward situations that provide pleasure and you avoid situations that provoke displeasure. By viewing and explaining situations as opportunities, you create a field of excitement where employees are more apt to face challenges than shirk them.

Focusing on opportunity instead of problems is not just a matter of semantics. Here are some specific impacts of keeping an opportunity focus:

- **Opportunity Pulls:** Leading by stoking people's fears provokes anxiety and negative thoughts of impending painful consequences. Opportunities are hopeful situations that evoke positive thoughts of pleasurable rewards. Leadership is most effective when it moves people toward a desired outcome rather than getting them to run away from a bad outcome. Opportunity attracts; fear repels.
- **Opportunity Points in the Right Direction:** When you are talking about opportunities, you are talking about the conditions you want instead of

the conditions you want to prevent from happening. Because outcomes often follow the direction of our thoughts, it's best to focus on what you want vs. what you don't. "Our opportunity is to keep the ball in the air" is better than "Whatever you do, don't drop that ball!"

- **Opportunity Activates Imagination:** We "take advantage of" or "capitalize on" opportunities. They are conditions that don't yet exist and require people's hard work and imagination to be fully exploited.
- **Opportunity Inspires Courage:** Opportunities are not "sure things." The positive outcome you hope to create is not guaranteed. Thus opportunities come with potential risks. The risk is what infuses the pursuit of opportunities with pleasurable excitement.
- **Opportunity Begets Opportunity:** Wouldn't you rather have your employees coming to you with new ideas and opportunities they want you to *support* instead of problems they want you to *resolve*? When you model opportunistic thinking, you increase the likelihood of building a self-sufficient, "can do" spirit among employees.

OF BIG OS AND LITTLE OS

Capitalizing on a really big opportunity often requires marshaling a host of smaller opportunities across an organization. In these instances, the open-door leader's job is to broaden the opportunity landscape for the entire organization. To illustrate this concept, consider the story of Sutton Bacon. To the surprise of many, Sutton became the president and CEO of the Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) in his late twenties. People wondered how a guy so young could be given the opportunity to lead a whitewater-adventure facility with such a rich history. But the choice made sense. Though young, Sutton was perfectly suited for the job. He

had previously been the president of American Whitewater and, after graduating from Emory University in Atlanta, had worked as a marketing strategy consultant. What mattered more was how deeply Sutton loved the NOC. He had learned to kayak there when he was five years old. He knew, and valued, the NOC's rich history. He also knew of its financial struggles and competitive threats. A new year-round whitewater facility had just opened up in Charlotte, North Carolina, just two hours down the road. Sutton, part kayaker and part hard-core business consultant, convinced the NOC's board of directors that he was the right guy for the job.

For Sutton, the big opportunity was to create long-term sustainability for the NOC. That would require solidifying the NOC's preeminence as a whitewater mecca while expanding its offerings. The challenge for Sutton and his team was to get the bulk of the workforce—raft guides—to see that the NOC's opportunities would be limited if it continued thinking of itself as being a rafting business. Far more opportunities could be created for everyone by becoming an adventure business. More customers could be served, more money could be made, and more fun could be had if the NOC went beyond being a rafting outfitter to become a provider of memorable *adventure experiences*.

Becoming a world-leading provider of adventure experiences would require changing or reinvigorating nearly every aspect of the NOC. Sutton and his management team aimed at the larger opportunity (sustainability) by creating many smaller opportunities. They started hosting more national and international canoeing and kayaking competitions, which brought more exposure to the NOC and more revenues to fund other ideas. They launched more informal events too, like the annual Halloween Pumpkin Run, where kayakers competed by scooping up bobbing pumpkins on their way down through the rapids. They opened Slow Joe's Café, a small sandwich shop right at the river's edge. They even successfully convinced the leaders in Bryson City, North Carolina, to lift the NOC's alcohol license restrictions. People could now

buy a beer and wine from the NOC instead of bringing it in their coolers.

The more opportunities Sutton and his team created, the more money they had to create more. They started an instant-photo business whereby families could purchase high-quality photos of themselves immediately after storming down the river. They opened an outdoor store in downtown Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and a LEED-certified retail store in the historic Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina.

Most importantly, Sutton and his team significantly increased the number and types of adventure programs available to customers. In addition to whitewater rafting and kayaking, programs now included things like ziplining, jet boat rides, mountain biking, high-ropes excursions, fly fishing, and international adventure excursions. The NOC was now squarely in the business of adventure.

Sutton and his team of open-door leaders had broadened the NOC's opportunity landscape. They were shifting people's thinking of the NOC from a North Carolina summertime rafting outfitter to a world-class commercial business enterprise offering unique adventure experiences. As a result of tightly marrying thrilling adventure *and* sound business, the NOC was becoming sustainable. Sutton even testified before the US House of Representatives Small Business Committee, where he was honored as by the committee as a "Hero of Small Business."

In the process of broadening the NOC's overall opportunity landscape, Sutton himself became an open-door leader. None of the opportunities his company expanded into could have been accomplished without Sutton opening the doors for his team to try new ideas and grow into new positions.

Bear in mind that the opportunities that Sutton and his team created weren't without hardship. Some of the NOC's most tenured personnel fiercely resisted the changes. They felt like the balance had swung too far toward capitalism and too far away

they don't *sell* anything. They build. They experiment. They act. They create. And like Sutton and his team, by relentlessly focusing on creating opportunities for customers and employees, they open lots and lots of doors.

OPEN-DOOR ACTIONS AND REFLECTIONS:

- Write down your answers to these questions:
 1. What are some work-related opportunities or goals that “get you up in the morning”?
 2. In your work, what are you most excited about right now? Increase the time you spend doing things that awaken your spirit at work!
- Identify one work-related “problem” that is currently causing you anxiety. List the specific opportunities that this challenge presents. From now on, whenever you speak about this work challenge, refer to it as an *opportunity*.
- Identify one leader you've worked with and admire. Using the continuum below, place an *X* on the spot that best reflects the focus of the leader. Resist the temptation to say, “It depends on the situation.” Just think in general terms.
- Now think of a leader with whom you've worked that you least admire. Use the same continuum to mark their spot.
- Now consider your focus. Where on the continuum is your predominant focus?



The leader you most admire likely has more of an opportunity focus than the leader you least admire. If you want to be admired too, you'll focus on raising your opportunity-focus number. Do that by reaching out to the admired leader for mentoring. Ask:

- When you come up against a challenging situation, what are your first thoughts?
- In your career, who influenced you to view challenges as opportunities?
- What advice can you give for helping me see the opportunities that challenging situations present?

