

What I Know About Leadership — Putting People First

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It's an awesome and humbling responsibility to be in charge of a group of people.

As a leader, your actions and the words you say carry enormous weight. Decisions you make have a deep impact on the people you serve.

Some approach leadership by managing to performance—to them it's all about the bottom line. I'm quite the opposite. We all have objectives to carry out for the business, but after many years of experience (and a few hard lessons along the way), I've grown to believe that when you put people first the numbers will follow.

Conversely, if you put the numbers first you risk having disconnected employees who feel their job is sucking the life out of them, and you set the tone for a culture of distrust and resentment.

Human leadership is about connecting with people's hearts and providing the direction and support they need to thrive. But here's the catch: Not everyone needs the same kind of nurturing to grow. And your own

ideas most certainly are not the only or best way to get the job done.

Putting others' needs before your own has never been more important than right now. The COVID-19 pandemic has our world

turned upside down and the way we work together looks different than it did at the start of 2020. There are still many unknowns, and people are craving leadership to help give them a sense of purpose and control over such a chaotic situation.

Despite all the confusion of our current situation, one thing for me hasn't budged, and that's my philosophy about leading my team: People come first.

Here are a few practices I've adopted over the years that help me put my teams' best interests first:

Treat coaching meetings as sacred time, not to be missed

As work piles up and days get busy, it's easy to let individual and team meetings fall to the back burner. This is especially true right now with so many people working from



home—we all have a valid excuse to let those meetings lag. But to keep people engaged and keep teams performing we must not let them slide off the radar. Leaders owe it to their people to protect that time and make those meetings happen in one way or another, no matter what.

The importance of human connection is proving to be more important than ever during this time of distance and isolation. People are meant to learn, grow and connect with one another. Over the past couple of months, we've had to connect in different ways, and thank goodness for the amazing technologies that enable it. Connecting virtually may be inconvenient and imperfect, but you're still making a connection.

As we slowly take steps back toward normal, the way our teams interact may still be different for a while. Perhaps your company will continue with a remote workforce or allow occasional work-from-home workdays as part of a permanent plan. Managers and employees may have fewer face-to-face meetings.

Regardless of what the new normal looks like, leaders must fight to keep those 1:1 and team meetings on the calendar. Whether virtually or in real life, those connections are an important best business practice and will ensure a smooth transition back to reality.

Advocate for work-life balance

One of my strongest leadership beliefs is that everything has to be working right in a person's life for them to be productive at work. The whole person has to be healthy

to be a good corporate athlete—that means getting good sleep, eating healthy, exercising, and spending quality time with your family. It's what allows us to “get after it” (in retired Navy SEAL officer Jocko Willink's words).

It's easy to become engulfed with work while in the thick of a project, and one of the best things leaders can do for their people is help keep them grounded.

It was John C. Maxwell who said, “It all rise and falls on leadership.” I try to never lose sight of the fact that what I do affects my team's work performance but also their home and community life. As their leader, I know my decisions impact their lives; and I can make their world better, or I can destroy it.

We're all in our own orbits, and if our families are the bright yellow sun in the center of our individual orbits, our job has a relative priority level of a yellow M&M.

If you advocate for what's most important to your people, they're going to stay centered on what makes them a well-rounded person. They will be better with their family, volunteer more with their community—and truly be the kind of solid, quality humans you want working on your team.

Find out what makes them tick

My role as division leader is to provide what others need to grow; not a bit of it is about me.

A good leader will find every employee's distinctive attributes, and then coach them to develop their strengths and work on

their weaknesses. Learn about their personalities, motivations and individual learning styles, and show how you value the contributions and perspective they bring to the team.

There are many great tools out there to guide this, and I'm a big fan of the [DiSC](#) personality and behavior test—understanding those four basic communication and personality profiles really helps foster an effective team dynamic of people that can gel and interact productively and supportively with each other. Our CPS team routinely talks about our DiSC profiles and I encourage everyone to post theirs in their workspace. It's useful for individuals to know where training might be needed in areas that don't come as naturally, and it helps the team learn how to operate as a cohesive unit.

Rather than make everyone fit the same mold, celebrate the unique characteristics that altogether create an even stronger team.

Be transparent and accessible to your people

I'm an open book. I believe leaders must be clear about their philosophies and be comfortable with their decisions being announced in the paper the next day. Maintaining an environment of transparency and trust is why my computer screen is always facing out so it's visible as people walk by my office. Most people working in cubicles don't have the luxury of changing their desk arrangement, so it's only fair for a vice president's workspace also to be on display.

When people are in my office, we sit at a little round table with bar stools. It's how I prefer to lead, coach and learn—together at the same table vs. separated by a desk or computer monitor. I'm not a manager from the 1970s industrial revolution.

Transparency is a powerful unifier to help teams work better and smarter together—when everything is out on the table, people feel more trusting, confident and in control.

Be someone people want to follow

A big part of leadership is knowing how to inspire people to be excited to come into work and face the challenges of the day.

I am a big fan of Bob Chapman's writings and presentations—his [Truly Human Leadership](#) approach transformed his company, Barry-Wehmiller, and he has been touted as top leadership influencer. Among his many brilliant statements, Chapman says people want to be led, not managed. They want to feel their leaders care about them. They want to feel connected and inspired.

Early in my career I had a boss who valued leading with an iron fist. In his eyes I wasn't doing my job as plant manager effectively unless I enforced my viewpoints in every discussion. After a while in the role, however, I learned my behavior was demoralizing to the people who reported to me. Our operational performance was on track, but that management style was really turning people against me.

That was a turning point in my career, and it was clear to me from then on that I had to change my approach in order to develop

the career I aspired to have. I kind of learned the hard way that great leaders are those who treat people in a truly human way.

Never stop learning and trying to be better

I am always studying and trying to get better. I do a lot of self-reflection on my own leadership performance—How am I doing? How can I get better? How do I push and challenge my team and help give them the greatest job satisfaction?

I read at least one book per month and try out one or two lessons from each with my team. I routinely tap into the resources on Manager Tools, an online repository of excellent managerial and leadership topics. And, I learn by listening to and observing the talented people around me—my team, my fellow leaders within Wenger, and the clients and partners we work with every day.

We never reach a point where we know it all and have all the right answers, and that is why we always have to be stretching ourselves.

You Before Me

We are all individual creatures with unique perspectives and contributions to make...and thank goodness for that. That's what makes teams stronger and more interesting.

I do my best to help everyone around me be successful and give them the tools they need to succeed. Making a positive impact on my team is my No. 1 job—to give them direction and hope for the future, and keep

them coming back day after day, year after year to continue growing with us.

[Corporate Project Services](#), a division of Wenger Manufacturing, is a dynamic group of planning specialists backed by Wenger's more than 80 years of process system supply to the industry. Our knowledge base and breadth of experience in extrusion processing and facilities construction is unsurpassed – and our commitment to excellence is recognized around the world.