

# NAKED LEADERSHIP

## Introduction

**So here's another leadership book... Yep, one more to add to the thousands already gathering dust in bookshelves all over the world. Or is it?**

What made you pick this book up?

Why do you want to learn about leadership?

**The probability is that:**

- **You are a leader already and you want to be a better one**
- **You are learning to become a leader at the moment**
- **You want to become a leader one day**
- **You work for someone who is supposed to be a leader and is very clearly not.**

**Leadership has, for millennia, been something that has been argued about, theorised over, worried about, and fought over.**

It has, in some places, gained an almost occult following. It has been studied, analysed, formulated, de-constructed, re-constructed, re-invented and revolutionised. Leadership theory has travelled the range from the formulaic to the absurd and yet, every day, we see more books about the mysterious secrets to workplace harmony. Theories and formulas may send chills of ecstasy through the spines of academics everywhere, but they have little benefit for the besieged front-line leader.

Well, my humble contribution to this whirlpool of information is based on...dare I say it, common sense. But, as someone (probably *not* Yogi Berra<sup>1</sup>) once said, “*Common sense ain't so common*”.

*Naked Leadership*<sup>®</sup> was not the result of divine inspiration, a ‘road to Damascus’ conversion, a thesis for a PhD, nor did it appear following abduction by a UFO (as far as I can remember...).

Quite simply, it was born of my desire for professional survival.

It was born of leadership training and experiences, both military and in business that left me with more questions than answers. It was born of years of reading and researching and well-intentioned ‘experimentation’ on live human subjects in the workplace, many hours of doubt and thought and not a few serendipitous happenings.

It was also born of anger at seeing first hand, so-called leaders in business selling out their employees for personal gain, playing politics, failing to back up junior leaders when a tough decision was needed and basically, being leaders in name only.

To me, as idealistic as it might sound, being a leader is a sacred responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Legendary US baseball ‘philosopher’ credited with sayings such as “It’s déjà vu all over again”.

Being responsible for aiding the growth and welfare of a group of people and wanting to help them become greater than the 'sum of their parts', is one of the highest callings a human can have.

Leadership has long been associated with the ability to 'stir people's souls to action' (whether that action is good for them or not).

Effective leadership can be a powerful influencing force and has been responsible for some of the greatest human endeavours and, when perverted, some of its greatest tragedies. Yet there are almost as many styles of leadership as there are leaders. Experts constantly argue over which is best and when and how to apply it.

In the media and in print, the inspirational leader has been held up as the highest form of the art, and it is an art. These people are the *rock stars* of the profession. Yet just like rock stars, their behaviour has in-built challenges for a company. The biggest one is that they are trading on qualities that are unique to them. It is also not possible to maintain a rock star persona forever. Just like a pendulum, extreme behaviour one way usually indicates that it will swing to the other extreme or at the least, people will see 'behind the curtain' and discover the Wizard pulling their strings.

More importantly, these qualities and their personality traits are usually not transferable to other leaders, and so have little use in the wider sense other than to inspire, but even this can backfire.

**Those who try to emulate 'high fliers', but lack the personality attributes, may become frustrated and disillusioned.**

Of course all of this is completely unnecessary.

There is only one Elvis...

Every leader would be far better off sticking to the everyday fundamentals of leadership that we will discuss as we go along and then 'flavouring the soup' with their personality or personal flair as long as this never impinges on the principles.

Leadership is much more than giving speeches. If this is your major talent, people will become bored and lose faith. This is usually when the speechmaker, seeing that their efforts are failing, becomes frustrated and lashes out at his or her team. They have made the whole scenario about them and the adulation they have been receiving.

When the cheers fade, so does their enthusiasm.

Too many people believe that they have to be 'the exalted one' and when this doesn't happen, they are disappointed. It's a bit like wanting to be in show business and going around expecting to become rich and famous, but not being interested in tackling the hard work, sweat, stress and persistence that make it possible.

Being a leader takes work, mental toughness and the willingness to ride out the periods when your opposition tries to undermine your efforts. This is never truer than in politics.

The 2008 election of US President Barack Obama was a watershed for US politics; the first African-American president. This was all the more remarkable because the Civil Rights Act which paved this way for this extraordinary election was only signed into law in 1964.

What was somewhat predictable however was that both before and after his election, having been shaken by his popularity the opposition party started after him on a personal level. Of course they couldn't outwardly attack him for being 'black', so

instead they accused him of being a Muslim because his middle name is Hussein (so what even if he was?-the US was founded on the principle of religious freedom).

When that didn't work, they accused him of not being born in the USA<sup>2</sup> but that lasted until his birth certificate was produced for public display.

When that didn't work they accused him of being 'elitist' because he was formerly a Harvard Law professor. I don't know about you - but the prospect of smart people running a country doesn't exactly fill me with dread.

Over time, the most irrational criticism was generated ultra conservative movements. This interesting group carried pictures of Obama with a Hitler moustache but denounced him as a socialist. Apparently the irony of accusing him of being an extreme left wing *and* right wing politician *at the same time* - was lost on them.

So what does this mean for leaders at large?

Well here are a couple of early observations:

- 1 If you bring change, be prepared for people to complain, even if what you are doing is good for them in the long term.
- 2 If you sweep in on a popular theme, do not expect it to last. Get to work building relationship with people, listening to their stories and determining what they actually need), as opposed to what they say they want) rather than bathing in the adoration or they will start to get misty eyed at what they had before (regardless of how much they complained at the time)

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<sup>2</sup> Non US born citizens cannot be elected President

- 3 The change you bring, even if you solve many ills, will not distract people from their woes for long, so get about removing those woes if possible.
- 4 If you communicate a lot at the start, keep going or you won't keep their attention.
- 5 People get excited by making a decision about change but change is governed by inertia. Whether it is losing weight, educating yourself or making a New Year's resolution, the reality of the work that is involved and the persistence that is required means that few people follow their decisions to their conclusion.
- 6 The more successful you are, the more opposition forces will fear their inability to counter you and the more desperate their tactics will become.
- 7 No matter what you do, some people just won't like you.

When the Utopia they hoped for fails to materialise immediately, some may begin to grumble and look for someone to blame.

Guess who is at the top of the list? Well - it's certainly not them.

That's why I suggest that if you think you have to be a 'rock star' leader, relax. There are very few who last.

Mature societies measure their leaders, in the long term, by what they do, not just by what they say. If you stick to the essentials, do them well and always act with integrity, you can really enjoy your role, (even if things aren't perfect) while gaining the respect and admiration of your peers and team members.

It was operating this way for the most part that saw Barack Obama re-elected in 2012 despite a still weak US economy.

In reality, 99.9999% of demonstrable leadership comes from *daily* actions.

The strategic direction-giving leadership is important, but after the 'New Year's Resolution' is made; someone has to lead the employees, *every day*, through tough times and good ones, in order to reach the goal.

This is the kind of leadership that makes companies succeed in the long term. This leadership is the fuel in the engine of any endeavour that involves teams of humans.

I believe that there is a right way of leading people – of being confident, being firm but fair while giving encouragement, having empathy, helping them to learn and develop themselves and allowing them to actually enjoy being at work!

It means looking for the good in your people and helping them correct the not so good.

It means fairly screening out those who, despite your best efforts, choose not to improve and rewarding those who do. But is there a way of achieving all of this and keeping your sanity?

As I went looking for that right way of leading, I kept running across books about 'rock star leaders' and how they changed the world, but very little about the people who really did the work — their mid-level and front-line leaders.

Not nearly as sexy - but reality very often isn't.,,

After attending countless seminars and reading hundreds of books, I found that most of the methodologies I saw fell into two categories:

- **What the ‘rock star’ leader says works; and**
- **What ‘Professor so-and-so PhD’, says should work.**

The methodologies also broke down into two basic groups:

- **When they screw up (and they will) here’s what you do... or,**
- **If you just project a spirit of harmony and love, everything will be OK.**

What I haven’t seen enough of is people talking about what the *employees need* from their leaders, in order to get their jobs done. This is one of the major areas where I believe we get it wrong. In advertising there is a saying, ‘Know your target market’. In show business, ‘know your audience’. Yet this concept seems to be absent from many leadership theories. Some people present the idea that a leader should go in knowing techniques for overriding all possible objections to the direction they will be giving.

Then there is the ‘leader as Shaman’ concept, which sounds sexy but leaves the vast majority of day-to-day leaders struggling with the reality of the workplace.

It seems to me that if you follow the advertising concept and work at understanding what employees, in general, want and need, and then (where appropriate) give it to them — you can’t go too far wrong.

No, I don’t mean endless days off and unlimited pay rises.

I believe that the vast majority of employees are responsible, intelligent individuals (and if they’re not, who hired them?) who

have talent, ability and an enormous contribution to offer, if we as leaders simply provide them with the right conditions.

I have spent years training leaders from many countries and have found that it was rarely a lack of desire or even basic leadership skills that got many of them into trouble.

Instead, it seemed to be a simple lack of perspective that was hampering their efforts.

Much like a doctor, they knew the organisation or team had a cold (it was coughing, spluttering, etc) but not how it was contracted, what issues lead to the cold, and how long it would last. So like our hypothetical doctor, they just kept jabbing it with different medications, hoping for a miracle cure.

Knowledge and skill are essential to success in any endeavour but unless you understand *where* these skills fit in, *when* to use them and *how* to create the conditions for success, you will fail.

As I spent some time teaching leadership courses developed by other people, I found, as a result of questions from the participants, I regularly needed to add a significant amount of information that was not addressed in the text. My own experiences as a front-line leader caused me to question what was being taught and as I explored and absorbed the questions my participants were asking, it became apparent that many leadership courses focused on the *what* and not the *why*.

Far too many of them are structured to demonstrate, in limited time that “When *this* happens, you do *that*”. Very few programs teach leader/managers to explore *why* this happened and *how* to create an environment where employees *want* to do the right thing.

Some programs reinforce old and ineffective ways of dealing with employee issues.

Too many others look great, but require far too much of the busy leader/manager. Some are so painfully difficult to apply that most participants lose the plot early, and sit through three or four mind-numbingly painful days, praying for the end or at least the next coffee break, to come quickly.

What a waste of time and money!

**NAKED** note:



**No matter how skilled and diligent a farmer you are, if you plant pumpkin seeds in your orchard, you probably won't grow apples.**

Instead, I began asking participants what they wanted from their ideal boss. From thousands of responses I began developing a better understanding of the leader/employee relationship.

What was remarkable to me was that no matter where I was, the results were the same. It seems that there are common denominators in any workplace that must be present and there are a common series of leadership behaviours that must form the basis of the relationship between team members and leaders.

We will explore these behaviours in detail, but in the process, I have also made some observations about the way leadership is taught and carried out.

**In what may seem a dose of the 'screamingly bloody obvious', I have, over the years, discovered several clear truths about leadership and humans.**

**They are:**

- If a leadership technique can't be used instinctively, it won't be used.
- If it doesn't make sense, it won't work.
- If it doesn't make me a better person outside of work, it probably isn't the way.
- If it increases my long-term workload, it is probably a mistake.
- If it doesn't involve treating people like adults, it will fail them.

As a result, *Naked Leadership*<sup>®</sup> is a very straightforward look at integrity-based, assertive leadership, without much in the way of the jargon, charts, graphs and labels that accompany too many books on this subject. This is not an esoteric guide to your leadership karma or a scientific formula for brainwashing employees.

In fact, after more than a decade of teaching Naked Leadership and coaching leaders at all levels, I decided to take a sabbatical and go back in the senior management to validate my beliefs and practices once again.

So I went to work for an organisation as head of Business Development, but before long I found that while this company had excellent technical skills and resources and good people working there, the senior leadership was utterly lacking in any concept of how to care for, motivate and develop its people.

There wasn't even an HR Manager to support the 'people' processes. It was not surprising that this lack of 'people skills' spilled over into its customer relations. After a couple of years of banging my head against this wall (despite managing to help significantly increase revenues), it was time to move on.

This experience refreshed a lesson I learned from my time in the US and from years in consulting.

If an organisation needs to change its culture, it has to come from the top and be supported at all levels.

Despite the internal resistance, I demonstrated to myself and my team that everything in this book is still relevant and effective, perhaps more so then when I first wrote it.

Not because I have some '*Secret*' to give me the answers but because people haven't changed since Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu made his observations 2,500 years ago...

No matter what country I am in the same principles apply.

That's because this book is about day-to-day life, as a leader of people in the real world and that is why the principles within will work for your family, your friends, your community, your co-workers and most humans you encounter.

All you need to do is apply them and be persistent.

But more on that later. Now into the book...Enjoy! DB 2013