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The New Gold Standard of Leadership: A Counterintuitive Approach to Rising from Adversity

By Steve Farber



A while back, I received a distressed email from Ken, a young manager at a high-tech company.

Ken and I had never met, but he had read my first two books and had done his best to apply the ideas and practices of Extreme Leadership to the way he'd led his team. To their culture, their work ethic, their camaraderie. When necessary, Ken told me, they would band together and work hard -- 10 to 20 hours a day at times -- to solve a problem or meet a pressing need. Ken's wife would cook food for everyone and bring it to the office. They felt like a family, he said, committed to doing great work and devoted to one another's success. No one ever complained, least of all Ken. At one point, he'd even forgone his bonus so his employees could collect theirs.

And then something happened. A downturn, a re-org, a shift in the management structure -- we all know the drill. Ken still had a job, but his position was eliminated. New management full of old ideas came in to oversee the department's function, and the emotional fibers that had connected Ken's team to each other and to their work unraveled.

"Now," Ken wrote, "for the last 4 weeks I sat at my cubicle, web surfing for 8 hours a day at the same company where I once worked 39 hours straight with my team to make things right, never going home.

"I'm not a quitter; I don't want to leave. But -- just or unjust -- I feel stripped of everything we've done" he said. "So the advice I'm looking for is this:

"How do you get back up?"

Even though I've spent the last 20 years coaching leaders and consulting to management teams, I was still loath to respond. After all, I had only the sketchiest of details about Ken's situation, and it was just presumptuous of me to assume I could help him with a few pithy words of advice. Nonetheless, I did have an idea for him, and I instinctively felt that it could make a huge, positive difference in Ken's life -- and in the lives of those he worked with.

And it wasn't the kind of management or leadership advice you'd expect.

It's already become a cliché to say that we live in unprecedented, challenging times. We all know it. But the truth is, the world of work is always challenging. That's why they call it "work."

No matter the industry, market, or type of company you work in, you've had to deal with some combination of the classic work-place obstacles, issues, and barriers to a successful leadership experience.

At some time or another, for example, you've reported to bosses or people in positions of "greater authority" who were self-centered at best, and idiotically egotistical at worst. They took all the credit and none of the blame and could care less whether or not you succeeded or failed. Or worse, they preferred that you'd fail, and took great pleasure in your struggles because they felt it made them look stronger.

Or perhaps you worked in a company that, even though populated by terrific human beings, was so obsessed with the bottom line and shareholder value that you were forced to make strategic decisions that compromised your own employees' abilities to serve the customer. And as your employees grew more frustrated, the customer satisfaction levels plunged, which made you and your employees more frustrated. And so on.

You may have been in an environment that was hyper-competitive to the point of paranoid, risk-averse to the point of stifling, or so political that it made you consider running for local office just

to get some relief.

We've all experienced some combination of these themes with varying levels of intensity. And we've all spent some amount of time and energy navigating our way through the challenges that come from trying to lead in those conditions. It's just the price we pay for being managers. And human beings.

Now, add to that the current, sucking implosion in the economy, and it's easy to see why, with all our efforts to be positive, productive leaders, we still get knocked down from time to time. Sometimes way down.

Our knee-jerk reaction in times of crisis is to hold on tighter, to be more cautious in our actions, and more protective of our resources. We think that our way out -- or up -- will come by virtue of shoring up and hoarding what we have.

There is, however, a much more powerful course of action, which -- though counterintuitive in these hyper-competitive times -- is based on a timeless reality of true leadership:

Your own greatness as a leader lies, paradoxically, in your ability to cause others to be greater than yourself.

Said another way, your (and my) best way out of a leadership challenge or crisis is not to focus on your own peril or rut, but, instead, to reach out and try to boost someone else over your head.

The idea should sound familiar. It's really just a variation on the "do unto others" sentiment of the Golden Rule, a philosophy that exists in virtually all religions, schools of thought, and philosophies on the planet. And in none of those versions -- not one -- will you find a footnote saying, "Does not apply Monday through Friday between the hours of 9 to 5 or in any situation where a paycheck is involved."

So the solution I offered to Ken was this:

Instead of wallowing in your own despair, pick someone at work to invest in, with the intent of making that person greater than you are. Be a coach, guide, or mentor in the truest, most personal sense of the words by choosing someone to be your GTY (Greater Than Yourself) project, and see what that does to your own predicament, your own state of mind.

Maybe it was out of desperation, but as surprised as he was by the curve ball I'd thrown him, Ken took my advice and agreed to the challenge.

Two weeks later, Ken wrote to say that he'd thought deeply about our conversation and had come to realize that before he could lift someone else up by sharing his knowledge and experience, he needed to be sure that he had learned the right lessons from the recent team trauma. So he'd met with his boss, and asked for feedback on how he could have acted differently, what he may have done to contribute to the problem, and how he could be a better leader in the future. "The 30 minute meeting turned into a 2 hour confessional," said Ken, which resulted in him learning some hard, "gold lessons" about himself.

"Now," he continued, "I've already started to work with a tech on my team who wants to be a manager. And I'm taking a vow," he said, "to make the people around me better -- as I continue to grow myself. I'm going to teach my children about this, too." Ken, it seems, has gotten his energy back, and he's well on his way to getting back up -- by lifting someone else.

We're all human, just like Ken. And just like him, we all get bashed down from time to time. Next time, try to resist the temptation to pull yourself up by the proverbial bootstraps, and reach out to pull someone else up, instead. Go find someone to be your GTY project, and ask them to do the same.

And don't be surprised if -- through your example -- your whole organization, company, or team rises to establish itself as the new gold standard of leadership.

About the author:

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