

The Zen of Leadership

By Michael Beck



There are many aspects to leadership that parallel the philosophies, concepts, and perspectives of Zen Buddhism. I don't profess to have a great depth of knowledge regarding Zen Buddhism, but from the insights I do have, I can see the application with respect to effective leadership.

The parallel exists within the concept of leading without leading. It exists in the ebb and flow of leadership style. And it's reflected in the very duality of the role of a leader within an organization. Let me share my perspectives on each of those concepts as an insight into effective leadership.

The first concept to expand upon is that of leading without leading. Many people hold the notion that leadership is about leaders and followers. They feel that an effective leader learns how to either "pull" their followers along, or they become adept at "pushing" followers to "follow". At first blush, this might sound a bit simplistic, unrealistic, or naïve, but the practice of pulling or pushing followers is much more prevalent than one might expect.

When we push or pull followers along, they're simply acquiescing to our demands or desires. In contrast, when a leader truly has people following him or her, people act not because they "have to" so much as because they "want to". How is this accomplished? How do we shift our team from acquiescing because they feel they "have to" to a place where they excel because they "want to"?

That is captured within the concept of leading without leading. An accomplished leader develops the ability to inspire those around him or her to be, do, and give their best. The leader inspires them to be, do, and give willingly. An effective leader elicits excellence from their team. It's not about "getting" people to do anything. It's not about being viewed as "the leader". It's really about becoming the kind of person others admire, respect, rely on, and want to emulate. People are attracted to and respond to someone because of who they are, and not because of what they do.

Effective leadership is about leading without leading - a Zen-like philosophy.

The next concept to examine is the ebb and flow of leadership style. Many leaders make their mark on an organization by staying true to a certain style of leadership. And while consistency and acting in integrity are critical to strong leadership, one's style of leadership needs to ebb and flow with changing situations and circumstances. It's analogous to the Eastern concept of Yin and Yang. The very symbol for Yin/Yang illustrates the never-ending flow between hard and soft, strong and weak, expanding and contracting, masculine and feminine. And even within those concepts, the seed of its opposite exists.

For leadership to be truly effective, there needs to be a flow of style. Sometimes a strong, unyielding style is required, and other times, a determined, yet yielding style is called for. The more adept at

masterfully flowing among the various leadership styles that one becomes (yes, there are more than two styles), the more effective that leader can be at eliciting excellence.

Effective leadership is about ebbing and flowing - a Zen-like philosophy.

The final leadership concept to examine is that of the duality of the role of a leader. This philosophy once again parallels some of the principles of Zen Buddhism. The duality of leadership is reflected in the fact that sometimes a leader is the Master and at other times, a leader is the Servant. In truth, Servant Leadership can be an extremely effective role which fosters respect, admiration, and trust - all of which are very powerful influences in eliciting excellence.

It is the very existence of the role of Master that allows the role of Servant to exist - and to exist with such impact. Without having a role as Master, the impact and influence of the role of Servant is greatly diminished. Conversely, without the role of Servant, the role of Master loses its effectiveness as well.

If a leader acts in self-interest without regard to the people they are leading, then their impact and effectiveness is soon diminished. Over the years, we've seen the self-interest of many corporate leaders exposed, and their power and stature destroyed.

The other extreme can be just as ineffective. If a leader abdicates his or her authority, is unable to make confident decisions, and does not command respect, an organization will soon lose its way and drift apart.

Effective leadership is about the duality of Master and Servant - a Zen-like philosophy.

The concepts of leading without leading, flowing among leadership styles, and understanding the role of leader as both Master and Servant are essential to effective leadership and to eliciting excellence. If a person is to excel as a leader, they must abandon the concept of developing themselves as "leader" and must instead, embrace the concept of mastering the ability to elicit excellence in others. This is not simply a matter of semantics, but a fundamental shift in perspective.

About the author:

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