

Taboos and Leadership

Painful, touchy, intimate, difficult-to-discuss, and politically incorrect taboos of leadership are the subject of this book. By holding them up to the light, judging them for good or bad, exposing their myths, and revealing their underlying truths, I hope to create a helpful and instructive description of leadership that will benefit leaders, their followers, and those who aspire to become one or both.

Why is this necessary? Because leadership is so poorly understood. Despite the billions of dollars that have been spent on leadership development by companies around the world, the results have been mixed. The reason is simple: the biggest taboo of leadership by far is our unwillingness to examine what it really takes to lead. We've expanded the term *leadership* to refer to anyone who is relatively skilled at his or her job, holds a position of some authority, and has a modicum of charisma. We talk about servant leadership, influencing quietly, leading from the heart or by example, or passionate, irreverent, or visionary leadership. We do not talk about the importance of power, intelligence, self-centeredness, political gamesmanship, double standards, insecurity, arrogance, competitive fire, or manipulation. That would be way too much reality for most people's tastes—an experience akin to looking at war

photographs on the nightly news and seeing the terrible reality of violence up close. We prefer our leaders, like our movie stars, to be idealized versions of who we want to be.

And yet if we do not understand what leadership really takes, how can we possibly do a better job at identifying, developing, becoming, and coaching leaders? Notice the focus on leadership, not just being a leader. As an intellectual mentor of mine, James MacGregor Burns, stated in his book *Leadership* (1978, p. 2): “The Crisis of Leadership today is the mediocrity of so many men and women in [positions of influence]. The fundamental crisis underlying [this] mediocrity is intellectual. If we know all too much about our leaders, we know far too little about *Leadership*.”

So much has been written about leadership but so little of that writing illuminates what it takes to lead. Do a Web search of leadership, and you will see what I mean. It’s nearly as popular as diets, self-help, and cooking. On closer review, though, you will see that most of those leadership books focus on the biography or philosophy of the leader, not on what this person thinks and how he or she makes tough decisions, attains and keeps the position, gains power and uses it, inspires fear as well as loyalty and commitment, or what being a leader costs on a personal level and what it provides in compensation for that loss. Consider how familiar some of these leaders are as household names and yet how little we really know about the leadership they exercise.

Richard Branson, founder of Virgin, transformed the music industry with panache and style, swept into the airline business and did the same, then turned to soft drinks, cell phones, and whatever else struck his fancy. And in his spare time, when he wasn’t engaged in the kinds of dalliances that made the scandal sheets happy, he was attempting to be the

first person to circumnavigate the globe in a hot air balloon. But what is he really like, what drove him, and what did it take to become so successful? The truth of the matter is that we don't know.

Jack Welch started his tenure as CEO of GE by laying off thousands. At first, he was vilified as Neutron Jack, after the bomb that kills people but leaves structures intact. Next, he became Jack Welch the educator, leading teach-ins at the famous executive education center in Crotonville, New York. Along the way, he set GE on course for its amazing run of success by laying out ground rules that became legendary, like become number one or number two in your market or get out. When he cashed out, people were shocked, *shocked*, at the level and kind of compensation he received. But didn't Jack Welch embody both dimensions: the good as well as the bad, all along?

Herb Kelleher (Southwest Airlines), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Lou Gerstner (IBM), Roberto Goizueta (Coca-Cola), Jeffrey Immelt (GE), Steven Jobs (Apple), Sam Walton (Wal-Mart), Paul Tagliabue (NFL), Mary Kay (Mary Kay Cosmetics), Tom Watson (IBM), Meg Whitman (e-Bay), Michael Dell (Dell Computers), Warren Buffett (Berkshire Hathaway), Larry Bossidy (Honeywell International), and even Donald Trump (Trump Organization) all are legendary figures, and all are poorly understood. We set them on a pedestal for what they have accomplished but do not have the slightest inkling what it took for them to get there. When other leaders experience a fall from grace, we are just as bewildered. Martha Stewart's petty greed cost her company hundreds of millions; Jeffrey Skilling's hubris cost shareholders billions. By labeling such people as aberrations, monstrosities, and bad apples, we do ourselves little good. The explanation may be comforting, but

the level of our understanding goes no deeper than a newspaper headline. We can't talk about what makes a leader successful any more than we can talk about what makes this person a villain. Barbara Kellerman's book *Bad Leadership* (2004), for instance, focuses on ineffective and unethical examples and aspects of leadership, not the deep psychological currents that led people in power astray. The entire subject is in itself a taboo.

Taboos are issues or ideas that are too painful, embarrassing, threatening, or complicated to talk about openly. *Webster's Dictionary* defines a taboo as, "a sacred prohibition put upon certain people, things, or acts which makes them untouchable." In daily life, taboos are emotional hot buttons, something we may be attracted to privately but ashamed of publicly. As social beings, we go to great psychological lengths to avoid talking about them openly. Rather than deal with their reality, we prefer to talk about the mask hiding their reality. In that sense, taboos produce myths as much as euphemisms—glamorized falsehoods or false pictures that have the air of truth but none of the substance, the pithiness of wisdom but none of the depth. Taboos can be large or small, major or minor. We use euphemisms, myths, and glossed-over descriptions to cover them up. We don't talk about going to the toilet to evacuate our bowels; we say that we are visiting the bathroom. We don't think about death as a state in which we decay under the ground in a sealed box; we say that someone has passed away and been laid to rest. Indeed, our personal fear of death makes it one of the most difficult of events to contemplate, or as the great minister and sociologist Anthony Campollo puts it, "we can't stand the macabre sound of the grass growing over our own graves." Some of us won't even visit the doctor because we don't want to face the possibility of illness. Rather than confront our fear of death, we'd

rather not know, and then it might be too late. Others obsess about illness and fail to live fully because their fear of death has them in an equally powerful grip.

Organizations have cultural taboos. Some have an unwritten, unspoken taboo against leaving work early. Whether your tasks for the day are long finished or too difficult to complete without a good night's rest, the people in such organizations plug away and stay chained to their desks until well past quitting time because it would "look bad" if they left. Some organizations have a taboo against challenging up; in meetings, no one contradicts the boss. Some organizations are okay with office romances or after-hours drinking, and at other organizations, these actions are social violations and cause for dismissal. One midwestern organization prohibits employees from smoking not only inside the workplace but even inside their own homes.

Where do taboos get their power? It's a fascinating question because it gets to the heart of why one thing can be so tantalizing to some and so repellant to others. I believe that taboos are powerful because when we approach one, we touch a nerve. The surprise of the touch can cause us to stop or jump back. It's not easy to recognize when we feel a taboo personally, but sometimes we can see the effect of a taboo in others. Consider the next time someone around you becomes highly emotional, sensitive, titillated, or defensive about something; chances are that person is reacting to a taboo. The attraction or threat is powerful because it goes deeper than the surface level of consciousness. By the time we are adults, we have become adroit at controlling and influencing our feelings and thoughts on the surface. But taboos tunnel deeper than that and strike at the heart of something older, more primitive, and instinct driven: they touch our most innate desires and fears.

In my view, taboos are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. I believe that some serve a legitimate purpose by providing a restraint or social censure on unacceptable behavior. I also believe that other taboos obscure our understanding of important matters and need to be exposed. A *Harvard Business Review* article, “Breakthrough Ideas for 2005” (Buchanan, 2005), even included, as idea number thirteen, “A Taboo on Taboos.” But how do we know how far to go? Without mature examination, it’s difficult to know which taboos should be kept locked up and which should be defused and disempowered.

In this book, I examine ten taboos of leadership. In my career as an academic, a leadership expert, and a coach and confidante to senior executives, I have encountered these taboos over and over again. They are the deepest, most secretive, and radioactive misconceptions surrounding leadership. I did not choose them because I thought they were good or bad. I chose them because they are taboos. There are certainly many others in leadership, but the ten I’ve chosen to write about are exemplary of the notion of modern taboos. In the process of thinking and writing more deeply about these taboos, I have come to some opinions about which of them I think are worth preserving and which I think need to be exposed and left behind. That’s my judgment, and not all leaders in all circumstances may agree with me. My overall objective is to define what leadership really takes. I believe that if we understand the taboos of leadership clearly, then some of our more wasteful, wrong-headed, and even potentially dangerous misconceptions will be corrected.

For example, the simple idea of hierarchical authority has become a taboo in recent years. Does hierarchy serve a purpose, or is it an impediment to organizational success, as so many currently believe? No one who has ever served in

the military would argue that hierarchy—knowing who to turn to for clarity and direction in a crisis—is a bad thing. But is it bad for organizations? Most leaders I know would be reluctant to say that they are fans of hierarchical leadership, even if they believe in its merits. Does hierarchy stifle innovation, debate, dissent, creativity, and personal growth? Or does the fact that we view hierarchy as bad and prefer not to acknowledge its existence lead to bigger problems?

What about office politics? Many think that any form of political gamesmanship is wrong. In an age in which leaders aspire to sincerity and transparency, people should speak from the heart and never disguise an opinion, a feeling, or a worry. If that is so, how come political gamesmanship is such an unacknowledged aspect of surviving and succeeding in organizational life? Many times, it seems, the people who are most political are the ones who are most successful at rising through the ranks. Is this good or bad? Maybe it's both. In my experience, being political is a critical capability of leadership at all levels, but a certain type of political leadership serves you (and your organization) well on your way up, while a different kind is more suitable, useful, and inspiring at the top. The danger is not that political gamesmanship exists; it is that if we refuse to acknowledge its existence and fail to understand it better, we risk derailing our up-and-coming leaders for skills that they need and undermining our senior leaders for skills that will serve us well. By not understanding the nature of hierarchy, we fail to examine its costs and its benefits.

Why is this such a bad thing? Here's one reason. Imagine that you have an incredible misconception about what it takes to be a medical doctor. You don't know that you need to study intensely for eight to ten years. You don't know that you need to work forty-hour shifts. You don't know that you need to touch dead bodies and examine wounds and talk to

people whose relatives are not going to survive. You don't know about hospital inefficiencies or the difficulties of getting paid by health maintenance organizations. You have no idea of the difficulties dealing with insurance companies. As a result of this ignorance, you don't know what emotions you will feel or not feel as you do this work, and you don't know what the rewards and costs will be. Imagine, for example, that you believe the job of being a doctor will require only that you see patients who are somewhat ill in a sanitized visiting room and write them prescriptions on a pad of paper and collect a large paycheck every month while getting in plenty of golf. If you aspire to be a doctor, wouldn't you be better off knowing the truth before you decide whether that role is right for you? Even if you can't fully understand how difficult the job will be, won't you be better off if you've at least been given a snapshot of that reality in advance? If you were a patient, wouldn't you also benefit by understanding a little more clearly what doctoring is all about?

We don't provide leaders or those who aspire to leadership or even those who follow leaders with any of that truth. Instead, we offer them a sanitized, air-brushed, or glorified picture of leadership that masks or disguises reality. How then do potential leaders know what they are getting into? Is the job within their capabilities, interest, or makeup? Is it something they would want for themselves from a cost-benefit analysis? Leadership is not for everyone, nor should it be. Moreover, there is a danger that all of the scandals that have been surrounding leadership are off-putting for future leaders. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* posed the idea that the "Backlash Against CEOs Could Go Too Far" (2005). In fact, I believe that if up-and-coming leaders see only strife and misery in the role of top executive, they will be moti-

vated to reach the top for one reason only: the money. There are many, many perks and responsibilities to leadership; without an in-depth, brutally honest, and well-rounded understanding of what the job entails, how can any young person with high potential know whether he or she even wants to play the game?

What about today's leaders? Most are unable to acknowledge or examine in the light of day what really motivates them. They won't face what they dislike or like, what they fake or disguise. They don't confront the costs or clearly appreciate the benefits of their role. As a result, I believe that many leaders risk a deep personal strain because of the tension that arises between what they actually know inside and what they think they need to project to others.

I also believe that a leader's effectiveness is reduced in the eyes of followers if they do not understand what leadership takes. The existence of leadership taboos creates a gap between myth and reality. No matter how effectively a leader performs, any gap between idealized expectation and the gritty reality undermines credibility.

As you read about the taboos of leadership in this book, keep in mind that some taboos are functional and others are extremely dysfunctional. If we do not acknowledge their existence and understand their reality, we are allowing ourselves to be held prisoner to misconceptions, not unlike those who believed the world was flat or that life could never be created in a test tube. Ignorance is no excuse, and it is no virtue. What we do with our knowledge as mature and rational adults makes all the difference in the world.

If I startle you, enlighten you, shift your perspective, confirm some of your deepest suspicions, or make you curious about other leadership taboos, I will have done my job. I

also hope that you enjoy the journey. Reading about taboos and encountering them firsthand are two different experiences. From the safety of distance, we can find even the most difficult things interesting, titillating, and sometimes uproariously funny. Laughter and intrigue are our psychological safety valves, outlets for the release of the pressures of our social mores. Experiencing taboos is part of what make us human. Understanding taboos is part of what makes us wise.

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