

The Seven Insights of a Great Leader

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The first installment of this series on leadership introduced the seven insights of great leaders and discussed the first insight at some length: knowing how to quiet doubt and worry.

You may recall that these insights are for leaders who want to lead long-term. There are also insights for leaders who wish to be at the “philosopher king” end of the leadership range (that has tyrant at one extreme and philosopher king at the other).

The remaining six insights are: knowing how to care for the interests of self; knowing how to care for the interests of others; knowing how to navigate competing interests; knowing how to benefit from feedback from a partner or team; knowing how to hold self and others accountable; and having the courage to imagine and act on a vision.

Knowing how to care for the interests of self is really two challenges in one. The first and easier challenge is to know what to do. The second is to know how to do what needs to be done, consistently.

In my experience, most people know quite a lot about how to care for their own interests. They know, for example, they need to exercise regularly, to not smoke and to eat more vegetables (to take care of their physical self). Many know they need to avoid situations that cause them stress and to regularly seek the support and comfort of friends and family (to take care of their emotional self). Some, if not many, again, know that they need to find a reason for what they choose to do that is larger than themselves and gives meaning to their life (to take care of their spiritual self). We have countless experts with their products, services and advice to thank for being so well informed about what we need to do to take care of our interests.

The bigger challenge is to act in accord with all the expert advice on a daily basis.

To meet the challenge of behaving in their own interest consistently, the best at it do three things. They simplify, they work to make the behavior a habit, and they find ways to challenge themselves. For example, someone who wants to exercise might choose to ride a bike (and not hike or play tennis or some mix of other activities), commit to ride every other day and take an annual trip to do a 100-mile bike race. Alternatively, someone who wants to reduce stress might choose to attend a meditation class (and not yoga class or art class), take Thursday afternoon off every week and strive to reduce how much blood pressure medication needs to be taken.

There are a couple of other important aspects of caring for one’s own interests. First, those who are really good at it recognize that they must attend to all three areas: their physical self, their emotional self and their spiritual self. Each area of self-care is intertwined with the others. So, work in one area makes the work in the other areas easier. Conversely, neglect in one area makes work in the other areas harder.

Second, certain environments (both physical and psychological) are more supportive than others to the challenge of caring for one’s own interests. One might even say that half the battle is choosing a supportive environment. Just think of the difference between eating at the local health food restaurant and a donut shop. Or, consider the difference in stress between dealing with a customer who is appreciative and one who complains frequently and pays late.

So, to recap, knowing what to do to care for the interests of self is about identifying what to do for the physical, emotional and spiritual sides of self and then setting up a schedule and environment that support following through with what needs to be done.

In a natural segue, leaders who carve out or promote supportive environments for themselves take a major step toward furthering the interests of others (assuming they extend the environment to others). Indeed, when it comes to the insight of knowing how to care for the interests of others, there are really only two elements. The first is to figure out what is in others' interests. The second is providing an environment that is supportive of those interests.

In other words, knowing how to care for the interests of others comes down to taking two steps. Spending the time and energy to identify the interests and then establishing an environment that is supportive of those interests.

One way to identify how to care for the interests of others is to use your assessment of how to care for your own interests. It is a simple thing, really, as the best interests of people are more similar than dissimilar. A simple thing to do but a step that is often overlooked.

Another way to determine the interests of others is to spend time with them—and ask. If the asking is done within the framework of caring for the interests of another, two things happen. One is that the leader can fine tune how best to care for the other person's interests. For example, if having on-site daycare allows mothers to work with greater peace of mind, those mothers' interests are being cared for.

Second, the leader communicates real caring and interest by asking questions. This is especially true if a leader listens well and takes action when it is appropriate.

With a clear idea of what is in the interests of others, one can turn to setting up an environment that supports those interests. Ideally, such an environment allows people to care for their own physical, emotional and spiritual needs and provides some encouragement for their efforts.

Other aspects of a work environment that cares for the interests of others are clear expectations, regular feedback, regular appreciation for good work, and an atmosphere that conveys trust in people's good intentions and willingness to make honest efforts. In a study, the Gallup organization surveyed thousands of workers and came up with "12 elements of worker engagement." These 12 elements are great at predicting job satisfaction and employee retention. Most of the elements can be summed up as being: communicated expectations, genuine appreciation and opportunity for growth.

Closer to home, one CEO I know makes it a point to hand out the payroll checks to each of his nearly 100 employees every other week and thank them by name for their work. Another strives to have lunch with a different small group of his employees regularly. He expresses an interest in getting to know them and convey his thanks for their work. A third walks through his plant and makes it a point to greet and interact with everyone there, if only to say, "Hello, how are you, Jane?"

If this sounds like preaching for more "Kumbaya moments," you're partially right. The trick is that Kumbaya-type harmony is only part of the equation for success and it's the easy part. The hard part is setting clear expectations, communicating them regularly and providing frequent feedback about performance. These elements are critical in caring for the interests of others, and one of the most important requirements for effective, enlightened leadership.

In the next installment, I'll describe the next two insights (knowing how to navigate competing interests, and knowing how to benefit from feedback from a partner or team) that lead to great leadership.