

The Seven Insights of a Great Leader – Part III

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The first and second installment of this series on leadership introduced the seven insights of great leaders and discussed the first through third insights at some length: knowing how to quiet doubt and worry; knowing how to care for the interests of self; and knowing how to care for the interests of others.

You may recall that these insights are for leaders who want to lead long-term. They are also 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 four insights are: 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.

There is no simple answer to the question of how to navigate competing interests. There are formulas such as evaluating the pros and cons of different options (the rationale approach) and meditating on or contemplating the options until an answer arises “from the gut” (the intuitive approach). These formulas strive to take a task that is intrinsically hard and make it simpler. They do so at the risk of oversimplifying something that is often complex and colored in shades of gray rather than the extremes of black and white.

The formula recommended here is to weigh competing interests using a combination of the pro/con and intuitive strategies, but only after accounting for the natural biases we all have.

The primary natural bias is toward self-interest. This is selfishness and we all have the potential to think of ourselves first and others a distant second. I hasten to add that some level of selfishness is healthy.

Generally speaking, healthy selfishness does not negatively affect others. The line, if you will, is between selfishness that is in one’s own self-interest and also in the self-interest of others or, at least, neutral toward them; and selfishness that is at the expense of others. It is a line that divides “win-win” and “win-neutral” from “win-lose.”

The second natural bias is toward the self-interest of others. This is often called “selflessness.” It means putting someone else’s interests ahead of our own. It may be thought of as “lose-win.”

Most of us know someone who reflexively takes the losing position whenever interests compete. There are psychological reasons why individuals adopt this bias, but for the purposes of this article, it is simply a bias that must be accounted for when navigating competing interests. In other words, if you are inclined to take the back seat when interests collide, account for this bias.

When these biases are cleared from the mind, the formulas of weighing pros and cons and trusting intuition can be applied in sequence with greater confidence that the resulting decision will balance competing interests as much as possible. So, to navigate competing

interests, step 1 is to recognize any bias toward self-interest or toward other-interest; step 2 is to evaluate the pros and cons of any action that is contemplated; and step 3 is to do a “gut check” to pay attention to whatever your (bias-free) intuition tells you.

A couple of other things to watch for when navigating competing interests are: passion and perfectionism. Passion gets in the way of clearing bias. It is extremely hard to clear one’s mind of bias when passion is in play. Just think of the last time passion overruled your judgment when making a decision or guiding a behavior. Guard against passion steering you wrong when navigating competing interests.

Perfectionism gets in the way of learning from your mistakes. The fact is, you will not get every decision right when it comes to weighing different options. If you are a perfectionist, not getting it “right” will be distressing and is likely to trigger defensiveness, which hinders learning from mistakes.

Great leaders know that mistakes will be made when trying to decide between competing interests. They also know these mistakes are opportunities to learn how to better remove biases, weigh pros and cons, and listen to gut feelings. Mistakes are lessons in disguise.

Viewing mistakes as opportunities to learn makes for a great segue to the topic of knowing how to benefit from feedback from a partner or team.

The thinking and attitude that mistakes are opportunities changes everything when it comes to accepting feedback from others. Instead of defensiveness and denial about mistakes and areas needing improvement, feedback should be sought-after and embraced. Sounds good, doesn’t it?

In reality, even great leaders struggle from time to time with owning mistakes and admitting to the need for improvement. But if they are going to be consistently great, they must learn from their mistakes (while also admitting to them) and seek feedback on how to improve.

The price of not learning from mistakes or admitting to shortcomings is too high. There is the cost of making the same mistake twice (or more). There is also the cost of having to blame someone else. We’ve all seen a leader at odds with his/her followers after not accepting blame or critique about shortcomings. Indeed, it’s one of the most common things I see in organizations that struggle with turnover and team dysfunction.

Accepting feedback from partners or team members is a challenge that leaders must meet if they want to elevate themselves to the rank of being excellent leaders.

In the next and final installment, I’ll describe the last two insights (knowing how to hold self and others accountable, and having the courage to imagine and act on a vision) that lead to great leadership.