

Leading Conversations

by Carl Watson

What truly defines leadership? Is it the mundane organization of people and resources to reach some goal? Or is it the ability to elicit zeal and dedicated passion to some envisioned future? Both are probably important to the reality and myth of leadership. At times, our gurus and pundits focus on leadership as zealotry: inspired, crazy, and extraordinary leaders implicated in tragedy and triumph. At other times, they concentrate on leadership as effective talent or resource management: rational, systematic, and persuasive. Leadership is both. It is inspired. It is mundane. It is personal charisma and simple caring. It is quiet integrity, intense loyalty, and deep devotion. Yes, leadership is even about love. Leadership is about all these things and more.

But how do we get a handle on it? How do we understand it, reduce it, slice it, and digest it? Therein lies the subject of thousands of books and articles written and published, kept and thrown away. Undoubtedly, this article resides in the same class. Yet, there is something missing from this discourse, or, if not missing, it is simply not paid enough attention, given its importance. Simply put, "all leadership takes place through the communication of ideas to the minds of others." Leadership emerges in and through communication - not communication on platforms where solitary figures present beautiful messages, but rather on a lower, more individual level.

The heart of leadership is in everyday communication. Masters of the art of leadership practice it all the time. They recognize that leadership happens in and around dozens of conversations, long and short, that occur throughout the day. Vision statements cannot stand alone; leaders must reinforce and reshape their vision and strategy daily, linking the daily actions of their team to higher goals in order to breathe life into the strategy.

What are "leading conversations?" All conversations with people in your organization are an opportunity to engage them in the organization's strategy and higher purpose. Leading conversations answer the question, "How can I contribute?" or "How do I generate value?" Leading conversations focus people on important activities. These are disciplined conversations with the goal of focusing on the actions, processes, and products that provide value to the customer or business. Undisciplined conversations, in contrast, are unfocused or they are focused on the wrong things. Killers of leading conversations are cynicism, the blame game, and inaction.

In short, leading conversations provide meaning through stories, which reduce disorder and promote and guide action.

This article was adapted from a published article from The Institute for Leadership Dynamics, written by Mr. Carl Watson.

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