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Purpose Centered Leadership The Holy Grail of Performance Improvement

By Art Jackson



“I’ve spent hundreds of dollars on training and consulting and I’m still not getting any more performance out of my people than I did before I spent all that money.” Or maybe “we’ve gone to three, count em three experience team building sessions and they can’t get through one day of work without me having to separate them and play referee during the fights”. How about “we have had every equal employment opportunity, civil rights, affirmative action and diversity class created since the writing of the Declaration of Independence and we don’t seem to work any better together at all. And we sure aren’t getting any additional profit from our diversity”.

What will it take too finally get a great performance out of somebody? Anybody? Have you ever heard these comments or even thought them yourself? These are problems we see in any and just about every organization. Or are they? Is it possible that these are only manifestations of the real problem?

The Real Problem

We have for years felt that when people didn’t perform that the most effective way of addressing the issue is to either provide more management or more technical skills training. If there is a member of the sales team that isn’t meeting her quotas, let’s just send her off for some additional training on how to close the sale and when she comes back, we can expect that her numbers will go through the roof. And if it’s a member of the production team, well just give him more management attention and he’ll fall in line quickly. Now how many times have you actually seen additional skills training or additional management really work?

I do a great deal of work in the prison system. You might be amazed how much skill training is available for inmates who show any interest at all. I have never worked in an institution that did not have a life management skills program that was available and sometimes mandatory for inmates/ And as you can imagine, there is a great deal of management attention. And yet with all that additional skills training and management attention, our prisons seem to host the same people over and over again. Maybe the real problem is not a lack of skills training. Or even a lack of management attention. Maybe it's as simple as a lack of personal leadership ability.

More training in management simply will not address a lack of leadership skill. I can remember the first summer I was old enough to get a job. Two of us had the same training in the skills needed to get and keep a job; but only one of us actually got a job. Because after the management training took place, only one of us had enough personal leadership skill to pound the pavement until someone said, we have a position for you.

Increasing management skill might provide a temporary increase in effectiveness. But increasing leadership ability will provide a permanent increase in effectiveness. You must understand that management means doing things the right way. Leadership however means doing the right things. Developing the skill and experience to accurately decide what are the next best things to do and then do those things. Possibly the best example of this was the experience of Lee Iacocca and Chrysler. Chrysler was experiencing years of sub par performance. Chrysler had risen to the challenge by several changes of management and increasing the management training of just about every employee in the company. They only saw moderate temporary improvements. Chrysler had plenty of great managers and the company was still experiencing a low level of effectiveness that was threatening to put the company out of business and thousands of employees out of work. Finally, they hit on the right formula. They brought in a leader. Someone who had the vision to dream dreams but also to cause others to dream. A leader who could with almost unerring accuracy decide which were the best things to do. By bringing in a leader, Chrysler was able to turn around its fortunes.

Personal Leadership and Performance Are Connected

Let's talk about how important personal leadership skill is to your performance. Your effectiveness can never be greater than your personal leadership skill. John Maxwell in his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, indicates that it is the individual's leadership ability that determines their effectiveness. The lower an individual's ability to lead, the lower his or her effectiveness. Maxwell states that on a scale of 1 - 10, if your leadership ability is a 5, your effectiveness can never be greater than a 4. I think Maxwell is right on the money.

I also believe that this law extends to teams and organizations. The effectiveness of an organization can never be greater than the personal leadership skill of the weakest link. If the leadership skill of the weakest link in a team is a 5, then the effectiveness of the team

can never be greater than a 4. This concept became crystal clear to me while I was a staff officer assigned to a tank battalion in South Korea. One morning, we had an alert, which meant everyone had to report to the battalion area within 30 minutes and be ready to roll out to combat positions. To facilitate this roll out, the Battalion S-4 officer needed to be in the battalion area within 15 minutes. For this reason, a jeep was always sent to pick up the S-4. I liked that because I was the S-4 and without that jeep, I'd never make it to the company area in time. Half way through my tour of duty, my jeep driver changed and a new driver came in. I explained his duties to him and thought I had adequately explained the importance of getting up and getting to me in that jeep.

On his first alert, he was slow. He finally woke, but then took his sweet time getting ready and making it to my location. As a matter of fact, by the time he and I met, I had already given up on him and had covered half the distance between my quarters and the battalion area in full combat gear carrying a full duffel bag and a sack of additional equipment. Because of this little mishap, the battalion missed its mark on getting to its combat position. The failure ultimately was mine. I had not impressed him with the importance of his effort. So for the next month, I impressed upon his mind and mine in the strongest manner that we must both perform up to standards. I called my own alert every two to three days and times both of us to see how quickly we could get into position. The personal leadership ability of everyone in the unit has an impact on the unit and the unit will only be as effective as the person in the unit with the lowest level of personal leadership skill.

It is important to recognize that everyone leads at some point in time. Ever watch a flock of geese in flight? They actually rotate leadership. First one bird takes the lead position and then when that bird gets tired, he drops back to the rear and another bird moves forward to take the lead. So every bird must be ready to lead. In military units, it is recognized that in combat, leadership may change drastically at a moment's notice. So everyone must be ready to take charge.

What Is Personal Leadership?

There are a lot of definitions for the word leadership. In *The West Point Way of Leadership*, Col. Larry Donnithorne defines leadership as "influencing other people toward the achievement of shared goals". Peter Drucker defines leadership as "lifting a person's vision to higher heights, raising a person's performance to a higher standard, building a personality beyond its normal limitations". Webster's Dictionary simply defines leadership as "the ability to lead". I like all these definitions, except Webster's. They all handle certain aspects of the art. Yes, leadership is an art. And when done well, its beauty rivals the art of some of the world's masters.

Personally, I like the definition of leadership presented by Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf of Desert Storm fame. At a Peter Lowe Success Seminar, Gen. Schwarzkopf said leadership "is the art, skill, talent or ability to get others to do those things they do not normally or naturally want to do". If this definition is extended, then personal leadership

is ‘the art, skill, talent or ability to get yourself to do those things you do not normally or naturally want to do’. Personal leadership means your ability to direct yourself to perform even when you don’t necessarily want to. And that is incredibly important as you can see from the jeep driver example.

A friend of mine, Les Brown, indicates to get yourself to perform sometimes, “you gotta be hungry”. And nothing develops hunger like purpose. Purpose is that thing that you were created to do. It is your life mission. It is the one thing that gives you focus regardless of what else is required in your life. Purpose will help you decide which projects you should participate in and which will just drain off your time. Purpose will get you going when fatigue has made a coward of you. Yeah, you guessed it. Purpose is, in my opinion, the Holy Grail of performance.

Purpose – The Center of Personal Leadership

There is an entire six-step process that can provide the leadership needed to get the kind of performance that every organization is searching for. Let’s briefly look at them.

Develop the commitment to manifest greatness. Recognize the simple fact that each of us has an intended level of greatness that extends into all areas of our lives. Greatness, in performance terms, is defined as closing the gap between your actual level of performance and your potential of performance. For example, if you are involved in sales work and you have a goal of closing 25 sales each month and you complete 25 sales each month that’s pretty good. Unless you, have the inherent potential to complete 30 sales each month. Manifesting greatness is closing the gap between 25 and 30. Performing up to your true potential. The first step in the application of Purpose Centered Leadership is to develop the commitment to close the gap.

Change the things you think about all day long. Emerson said, “We are what we think about all day long”. But most often we maintain those thoughts, values and beliefs that hold us back and deter our ability to manifest our intended greatness. There is a scripture that I have an affinity for that says “are ye not conformed to the world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind”. The second step in Purpose Centered Leadership is to review and evaluate your dominant thoughts, values and beliefs and determine if they are working for you.

Discover and pursue your determined purpose. Step three is to put in the work to discover your Determined Purpose. There are all kinds of instruments that can help you finally figure out what you are supposed to accomplish in this life. Purpose gives you the kind of motivation that will wake you up early and keep you up late. It is the single most important factor in performance improvement at either the individual or organizational level.

Find some synergy between your calling and your vocation. We each have a calling and a vocation. The calling is what we contribute to others and our vocation is what we do to

pay the bills while we work in our calling. When we can develop some synergy between our calling and our vocation, we find our selves moving in the same direction all the time. No wasted effort. Your service work also moves you towards the accomplishment of professional goals also.

Develop a plan. I found a great quote at my daughter's school some years ago. "If you plan on being great, you better develop a great plan." Most of us spend more time planning our work days and vacations than our lives. Our lives are the most important, longest-term project that we will ever work on. Most will earn in excess of a million dollars during their life times. And we go into the project with nothing meaningful in terms of a written, considered plan. Purpose Centered Leadership requires that we write out a plan for that most important project. All of our activity falls into four (4) general objective areas and once we are organized, we can insure that our goals and objectives are coordinated to makes us as effective as possible.

Implement. The final step in Purpose Centered Leadership is to implement or act according to our plan. Daily activity to move us ever closer to accomplishing the milestones that lead to objectives that lead finally to the fulfillment of your determined Purpose.

It sounds like a lot but it really is simple, but it does require a great deal of introspection. But the great benefit is that in the end, you'll finally know who you want to be when you grow up. And some of the great manifestations of a lack of leadership ability will fade into your past.

Spent hundreds of dollars on training and consulting and still not getting any more performance out of your people than you did before you spent all that money? Help them discover their purpose. Gone to three, count em three experience team building sessions and still can't get through one day of work without me having to separate them and play referee during the fights? Help them discover their purpose. Had every equal employment opportunity, civil rights, affirmative action and diversity class created since the writing of the Declaration of Independence and don't seem to work any better together at all, and aren't getting any additional profit from our diversity? Help them discover their purpose. Purpose ... the Holy Grail of performance improvement.

It was impossible in the limited space of this article to fully explain the application of these principles. If you would like to receive an additional article explaining how to apply these articles to improve personal performance or the performance of an organization, please feel free to contact the author at artjackson@usa.net.

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