

The way forward ...

Recipes for successful leadership



Jos Vandael

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been in a position that you feel to be on the brink of a new era in the development of the world? If you would ask me : THIS IS IT! For sure there have been devastating challenges in the history of mankind but for this – post second WW generation – it is an unprecedented moment. For the last seven decades we, in Europe, have been creating a unique “Wellness society” that was fuelled by the “Sky is the limit” thinking. Globalisation was the solution for all kinds of problems. People were born and educated not to worry too much about the future because it was a one-way ticket to happiness.

And suddenly this idea is all gone. The future is blurry ... where will we be one year from now? How will the world look in 5 to 10 years? For the first time in our lives we should be worried for our children and grandchildren and to what kind of life they have ahead of them. We are facing a dangerous cocktail of health, economical, financial, political, environmental and social problems that are interdependent and create a domino of despair.

So it comes back to the question: ‘Do we want to live in a world of fear or hope?’ We know that fear can only lead to anger or immobilism which will lead us nowhere. Hope and vision should be our guide in this moment of uncertainty. We have a desperate need for real societal entrepreneurs that come forward to take the lead. People that can show the way forward, that can inspire others, that have the ability to mobilise people. In short term we are facing a serious recession and a collapsing economy. Until we have a vaccine for the Covid19, we will be confronted with an increased mortality and a health care system that is under pressure finally ending in ethical discussions about who is eligible to receive the proper treatment to prevent the consequences of this deadly virus. In medium term we will have to find a solution to deal with our staggering financial debts and in long term we’re facing the impact of the climate change on the living conditions on this planet that eventually could lead to the end of humanity!!!!

So I would say: ‘Cut the crap’, there is no time to waste if we want to feel responsible for our heirs. And let’s be clear on this, technology will not be the solution, people will!


But what is a sound definition of good leadership? I too have spent years pondering over the topic on a regular basis, and I have developed my own insights about it. My conclusion is that leadership is not something you are born with. It is a choice, a characteristic of people who stand up in certain situations and ‘take control’ to defend the greater good. Self-profit is never the fundamental motivation, but rather defending others. Leaders are people who manage to lead the way when things get tough. In other words, people who see the way themselves, people with vision. A leader takes others into account and therefore acts with an empathic mindset. They stimulate the relation and the interaction between people to allow the whole to become greater than the sum of its individual parts. That means also there is no such thing as one type of leadership. The leadership style and approach vary depending on the situation and circumstances. Crisis situations demand a different type of leadership than the celebration of great success. Furthermore, style also depends on the leader’s personality. What works for one person might not work for another.

It is not my ambition to write yet another manual on this topic. Everyone who knows me is aware that I am too straightforward to do that. On the contrary, in this essay, I have tried to find the ten characteristics that I consider the foundation of good leadership. I have listed them in their order of importance. Reflecting on my professional career, I have built in some tangible guidelines.

Perhaps you are a manager or have the ambition to become one? Please allow me to share my vision on successful leadership with you. My interpretation, based on my experiences. Who knows, there might be a likeness with your own vision? Either way, this is where the countdown starts.

Jos Vandael
December 2020

X be knowledgeable



Knowledge
IS
Power



It is crucial to be knowledgeable about the subject matter you are steering. *What business are you in?* I am not just talking about what you learnt at school – who and what – but also about processes and history – how, why, and for whom? A thorough knowledge of your discipline will help you better understand problems or discover new solutions by thinking kaleidoscopically. It provides you with the opportunity to play the part of challenger.

A healthy dose of curiosity is invaluable in that respect. The astonishment of a chicken laying its first egg! According to keynote speaker Jef Staes, some people are natural 'information collectors'. Not just collecting information, but also analysing and creating the necessary connections, leads to knowledge. In that context, an open mind is an absolute prerequisite. Only the right mindset will enable you to break through stereotypical thought patterns and realise a *mind shift*.

Allow yourself to be inspired by others, read books, and work on building your network. Do not be afraid of copying good ideas. Knowledge does not stem from experiences, but from reflection on those experiences.

Train your memory so it can hold a large amount of information and be aware that knowledge slowly transforms into skills, the skill to quickly recognise or execute thing.

IX

be an entrepreneur

MAKE
THINGS
HAPPEN!



An entrepreneur builds the future based on a clear vision. They translate that vision into specific short-term and medium-term actions and do not shy away from risks. These are not risks like playing the lottery, but well-considered decisions you make based on clear insights. Some setbacks can be rationalised beforehand. The entrepreneur builds in loss, without steering away from the course because of it.

Entrepreneurs master the art of energising and moving people to realise their vision. They often do that by leading the way and setting the right example. Entrepreneurs are hard workers who understand things do not happen automatically. They actively anticipate what might happen in order to stay versatile, and they are not afraid of making hard decisions.

They look for negative aspects, obstacles that can negatively affect the success of a project, to suppress them.

Simultaneously, they enlarge small successes.

Think big - act small, stay focused on the short term and on the things that can make a difference. Which levers can set things in motion? Avoid wishful thinking! Stick to the facts.

Furthermore, entrepreneurs have an eye for opportunities:

When the wind comes up, some will build shelters, others windmills. And last but not least: 'happiness' is often the result of a perfect preparation.

VIII be perseverant



Experience has taught me you can dump and abandon almost every project halfway through. But if you have done your homework properly, success can sometimes be achieved by sheer perseverance. After all, changes demand time, and miracles do not exist. Make sure you remain critical of the process and listen to the remarks of the people involved. Sometimes you will have to make some adjustments, which does not mean you have to lose sight of the end goal.

Believing in what you do is crucial in that respect. A good example can be found in tennis. Even though I am an average tennis player, I have noticed at several occasions that the game is not finished until the very last ball has been played. There are plenty of fantastic stories of games that were almost lost, only for the tables to suddenly be turned completely. In other words, never give up.

Moreover, obviously it is important you remain realistic – also in terms of your goals – and that you realise things do not always run smoothly. Unfortunately, losing is also *part of the game*. The road to success is paved with obstacles, and those who climb out of the valley always have to climb uphill. If the eventual outcome does not live up to your expectations, please remember Nelson Mandela's words: *I never lose. Sometimes I win, sometimes I learn.*

VII

stick to the basics



People are quick to be intrigued by new opportunities, but remember: 'Every man to his trade!' People with the spirit of entrepreneurship running through their veins usually see plenty of opportunities. The art is being able to resist the call of opportunism. Stick to the basics of your company. That does not mean you cannot innovate, but it does mean that innovations need to fit in with the core competence of your organisation. In other words, avoid being reckless.

Choosing is always losing to some extent, but if you make sure your heart and mind say the same, you will always end up in the right place.

Taking too many initiatives often means your attention is divided, as well as your time. Remember: multitasking is a myth. You can only do one thing really well at any given moment. Hence, it is vital to occupy yourself with the right things. Continue to focus on what matters and separate priorities from details. 'Profit' is the key to every organisation's success; 'passion' is the key for its staff.

VI

be a good communicator



The art of talking! As a CEO, you often end up in a position where you can or have to address a group of people. People often expect that from you. However, not every moment is suitable for bold statements. Choose your moment, especially when you want to discuss new or important subjects. *Wise men are not always silent, but they know when to be.*

A good speaker is, first and foremost, a good listener. Genuine listening means you are capable of translating what you have heard as follows: 'If I understand you correctly, you mean...' Talking is helpful, but if you have not listened properly, you will soon end up talking gibberish. Try out the technique of the *unreasonable question*. The response can be just as surprising as the question and help you on your way to a deeper insight. Try reacting with 'I understand' instead of 'okay' or 'sure'. Agreeing with statements you have not thought through yet can give people the wrong impression.

Communication is much more than conveying a message. It has to coincide with a strong story. That is why the atmosphere you create is so important. Communication needs to give people energy, make them dream, or at least make them think.

Not only the choice of words, but also the pace of speaking, the right intonation, and the necessary non-verbal gestures can make the difference. Good communication is based more on the way you say something than on the very content of the message. Be specific, straightforward, and to the point. Adjust your vocabulary to your target audience and do not use academic terms if they are out of place.

V be a leader



I had to think long and hard on where to put this guideline in my top ten. Many might believe this point should be higher up. 'Being' a leader and behaving like a leader are two different things. I believe some people have a natural urge to lead. That does not have anything to do with education, but only with their personality and their willingness to take care of others. This is where we are approaching the very core of leadership.

True leaders think in terms of 'US'. They reconcile contradictions, are modest, and allow their staff members to grow. They keep people from making bad decisions and give new opportunities when something goes wrong. After all, everyone deserves a second chance. Leadership is both moving boundaries and learning to recognise people's boundaries. Not to create obstacles, but to add points of improvement. Hence, coaching is crucial. That is why leadership is very different from entrepreneurship. The right word in English is *compassion*.

Leadership is also related to charisma, personality. I am not talking about one's appearance, but about the gift to provide people with a type of safety they are quick to accept. Never forget that people in your direct environment are looking for points of support at all times. That is why it is important to take into account the impression you leave in public presentations. Wrong perceptions are difficult to change.

Finally, leaders are *company boosters* who naturally emanate positivity. Being a leader requires a lot of energy. Hence, it's important to look for the right balance between body and mind. Good health, a stable relationship (with someone else and/or yourself), and plenty of sleep and relaxation are crucial in that respect.

IV be authentic



Authenticity refers to 'genuineness'. Not denying yourself, being honest in terms of your own values and ideals. It is often about simple things you were taught at home when you were young.

But authenticity is also 'individuality'. It is not easy to be unique; it is tied to one's distinguishing ability. If you want to grow, you have to distinguish yourself. Rise above the crowd. That means you have to accept some people will not like you, for that very reason. You have to accept you also have opponents. But if you want to make everyone happy, sell ice cream. People in a position of power receive a lot of criticism, but if they believe in themselves, there is no issue.

Authentic leadership adds so much more purpose to one's life. It is the inner source of energy, especially in tough times. Always being able to look straight into the mirror will also help you to sleep well under all circumstances. *Moreover, worrying will never change the outcome.*

Cherish the past, but especially embrace the future. Try to channel your energy towards the things that can change tomorrow.

III people are key



Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to be surrounded mostly by strong personalities. That has been part of my success. But selection and recruitment go hand in hand with tough decisions. You often notice every flaw in your own staff members, but you do not see the red flags outsiders carry with them. Job interviews are often conducted in a very superficial manner, in an atmosphere of 'we need someone'. As a result, the interviewer only hears what they want to hear, paying attention exclusively to the things that fit into the narrative.

It is a true art to select good candidates. I am careful not to make strong statements in this regard, because I too have been fooled. You learn from experience, which unfortunately, often costs a huge amount of time and energy. Always try to find someone who matches the organisation 100% and preferably choose people who are curious. People with a desire for information naturally have a lot of growth potential. *Do not compromise on talent.* Utilise people's talents and accept there is no such thing as perfection.

Of course there is also a flip side to the medal, which means it is possible you may have to fire someone at some point. This is never pleasant, not even when the reasons are pressing. Moreover, you never get used to it. Time and again, it is a major moment that makes both parties understand that consequences can be far-reaching. People often wait too long before taking action, so here is a golden piece of advice: *give up on toxic people as soon as you can!*

Give people energy by stimulating them, complimenting them on small successes and their general role. Make them part of the bigger picture so they feel useful. Do not forget, even in hard times, there is plenty of energy available... Sadly enough, it is often negative energy.



integrity



We are coming closer to the essence. This point could also have been the first one. I consider integrity essential, anytime, anywhere. Do not forget that you are partly, and increasingly in the past few years due to social media, a public persona. As a leader, you are in the spotlight and you are being observed. You cannot be a good leader if you do not have integrity. Moreover, I believe integrity is worth as much as dignity.

The way you interpret integrity can largely depend on your personality. But generally, that interpretation will be based on the fundamental values in our society. Honesty is definitely one of those. Lies are like feathers in a pillow: once they have come out, you can never put them all back in.

Candour is another value that belongs in this story. Steer clear of prejudice and make judgements based on the facts. Trust each other and trust humanity. Of course, prisons are overcrowded. And yet, this is only a tiny percentage of the total population. Throughout my career, I have rarely been disappointed by people. That does not make the negative experiences less painful, but I can count those on the fingers of one hand. They do not compare to the large number of positive experiences. News coverage always focuses on what people are doing wrong, but the truth is different.

I be passionate




That's it, this is where the curtain drops. I consider this the most important characteristic of a good leader: passion. Making people enthusiastic and inspiring them, through engagement: "You can count on me, at any moment".

Passion is associated with red, the colour of love. That means it is not only related to people or things you love, but also to what you enjoy doing. Make it special, for yourself and for your staff members. *The beauty of life is the joy of living.* Passionate people can make things attractive. Transition in an organisation does not have one origin; it is often the sum of several small things. Passion can be contagious, give people energy, and provide depth.

Passion is accompanied by ambition, a goal to strive towards, a perspective that gives your life a soul and a purpose. It is the legacy you leave behind and what people will continue to remember. Dare to dream, because dreams give you a reason to get up in the morning, day after day. And look for the roads less travelled.

*"I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference". (R. Frost)*



© Jos Vandael & Beefcake Publishing

Beefcake Publishing
E. Seghersplein 21, B-9000 Gent

www.beefcakepublishing.be
www.facebook.com/beefcakepublishing
www.instagram.com/beefcakepublishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.