

Leading Well Is Simple By John Hollon

These are great times to be in the leadership business. I'm not taking about being a business leader, although CEOs are also doing pretty well, given the exorbitant pay packages we keep reading about. I mean the business of talking about leadership.

Everyone seems to think they have the answer to what it takes to be a great leader. A quick search on the word "leadership" at Amazon.com turns up 183,000 books with the word somewhere in the title. And at a recent HR conference I attended, there were no fewer than seven different keynote speakers and 10 workshop presentations that focused on leadership.

Leadership is everywhere, it seems. But there is a backlash building.

As much as America loves decisive, confident, larger-than-life leaders—think George Patton or former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani—America also wants leaders who are sensitive, caring and respectful of the needs of the troops they lead.

"We should be focusing more on leadership and less on leaders. It's not about a person, but about the process." --Dave Ulrich, author

The Jack Welch approach seems to be on the wane. More and more, I hear leadership speakers challenging what Welch and other leadership celebrities have been preaching. As noted human resources author and University of Michigan professor Dave Ulrich put it, "We should be focusing more on leadership and less on leaders. It's not about a person, but about the process."

This raises an interesting question: Why are there so many leadership experts these days? I think it's because it is so difficult to define what a leader really is. There's no magic formula.

The statistics show that workers are desperate for leadership. I heard a speech by organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley, author of numerous books including *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*, and she offered these numbers to show how workers are dealing with pressures (you can also read that as "lack of leadership") in the workplace:

- ▶ 33 percent of lost worker days are stress-related.
- ▶ 65 percent say they receive no job recognition.

▶ 88 percent of workers say they have ideas to improve their work, yet only 15 percent offer them.

▶ 16 percent of all workers are "actively" disengaged.

▶ 55 percent of all workers are disengaged (she called this "warm chair attrition").

These are sobering numbers, but they make me wonder: For all the books and well-paid speakers focused on the need for better leadership, why can't we get it right?

To me, leadership is pretty simple. It's certainly not about the latest management fad or trend or the hard-nosed Jack Welch approach, where you reward the top performers, fire the bottom and generally ignore the middle. All of these management speakers seem to have something good to say, but they dance around what it takes to be a good leader. My battlefield-tested recipe for leadership is a lot more basic:

▶ Be clear about what you want from people and talk with them about it frequently.

▶ Have an ongoing conversation about how they're doing, both the good and the not so good.

▶ Be kind, and be generous, especially with your praise.

▶ Give people the benefit of the doubt and remember that nobody is perfect.

▶ Treat everyone the way you would want to be treated.

Finally, remember these words of wisdom from the ultimate authority on leadership, Peter Drucker, the father of modern management:

"Leadership is not magnetic personality—that can just as well be a glib tongue. It is not 'making friends and influencing people'—that is flattery. Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations. ... [In short,] management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things."

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