

# IGNITE YOUR LEADERSHIP



THE POWER  
OF NEUROPSYCHOLOGY TO  
OPTIMIZE TEAM PERFORMANCE  
STEVE SWAVELY, PH.D.

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All stories in this book are true, but names and some details are changed to maintain confidentiality. The purpose of the stories is to teach valuable business lessons.

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CHAPTER ONE

**WHY DO LEADERS STRUGGLE?**

*Tend to the people, and they will  
tend to the business.*

—JOHN C. MAXWELL—Author and Leadership Expert

THE STRUGGLE OF LEADERSHIP

In my initial interviews with executives I'm coaching, in addition to learning their objectives for their leadership and team, I also like to understand what they like and dislike about their job. Here is an example of that dialog with a CFO I was asked to coach:

Me: "John, before we talk about your objectives for coaching, I'd like to get to know you a little better. I have a few questions to ask. Would that be OK?"

John: "Sure. Fire away."

Me: "Well, let's start with this one. What do you find is the most exciting part of your job as a leader and CFO of this company?"

John: "Well, I love my responsibility as a leader here. My responsibility is to ensure this company stays on budget, makes money, and continues to grow financially. That's exciting, and I love the work that responsibility brings me."

Me: “That sounds like a lot of responsibility, and it also sounds like you enjoy that responsibility as well. Now, tell me, what is the least favorite part of your job as a leader and CFO of this company?”

John: “I think this would be the greatest job in the world if only I didn’t have to deal with the people. Yes, that’s it. People can be so difficult.”

John’s ironic perspective as a senior-level company leader is not uncommon. Leaders do indeed have a tremendous responsibility. That also is a great challenge. To be successful in tackling the challenges of this responsibility, you must balance two interdependent but frequently contradicting approaches to leading:

- One approach leverages the technical expertise required for your role. This is about executing the technical and operational systems that produce and deliver your product or service.
- The other approach leverages your relationship expertise that optimizes your team’s performance. This is about nurturing the human system that is also critical to produce and deliver your product or service.

Here is the messy reality of this balancing act. If you are like John, and most leaders, you earned your leadership role because you are great at the technical aspects of the role, and you feel unprepared to tackle the sometimes uncomfortable and frequently difficult relationship aspects of the position.

Optimal team performance requires leadership that possesses great relationship-building skills and excellent

technical expertise. However, those two types of expertise rarely coexist in a single individual. As Peter Northouse pointed out in his seminal book *Leadership: Theory And Practice*, most people typically get assigned leadership roles because of their excellent technical skills, and then get removed from those roles because of their lack of people skills.<sup>1</sup> This is what almost happened to Lorenzo, an engineer at an aerospace manufacturing company.

### SAVING LORENZO

People who worked with Lorenzo described him as a genius in the applications of hydraulic mechanical systems. This expertise paved the way for his first leadership experience as the lead project engineer for a team of nine other engineers and technicians. This team was responsible for designing and testing a prototype for a novel approach to an aircraft landing gear unit. It seemed logical to put Lorenzo in charge of the team. No one understood the engineering aspects of this equipment better than Lorenzo, and he was driven by ambition and motivated to advance quickly in his career. He seemed like the ideal candidate.

At first, the team seemed to be on track with Lorenzo at the lead. They kicked off their design efforts and worked together to solve engineering problems that emerged in the prototype development. Soon, however, shortcomings in the team's function became apparent. Some of the group found Lorenzo abrasive to work with because he did not appreciate their areas of expertise and they resented that he rarely requested their input on important decisions. Lorenzo seemed to operate without awareness or concern for these problems. As a result, communication within the team began to suffer.

As communication misfires grew, Lorenzo's style stifled collaboration, and team effectiveness deteriorated. Distrust began to form within the team as well as within other departments in the company. The quality assurance team began finding an increasing number of issues with the prototype model, the safety team began to discover shortcuts that were unacceptable, and the finance team saw the project running above the targeted budget. Further, Lorenzo's efforts to implement a brand-new manufacturing process as part of the design were met with great resistance, slowing the project timeline to an unacceptable rate of progression.

In the face of clear evidence of trouble on the project, Lorenzo doubled down on leveraging his technical expertise and increased the intensity of his ambitious and driving leadership style, which only worsened matters. While a few people on the team were able to work under this style, most found it oppressive and demeaning. This resulted in the project moving even further off track. Lorenzo had failed to lead his team and engage them in committing to the project's success. The poor results they were producing demonstrated that fact.

Once senior leadership recognized the reality playing out for Lorenzo, they began discussing removing him as the lead project engineer. However, one senior team member recognized the value Lorenzo brought to the organization and feared they would lose him to their competition if he was demoted from his leadership role. As an alternative to immediate demotion, the senior team arranged for me to assess the situation from a leadership perspective.

The assessment revealed that Lorenzo had lost the trust and respect of almost everyone on his team. It also showed that Lorenzo had inadvertently violated virtually everything



known about the importance of developing relationships that are important to create optimal team performance.

This realization initially devastated Lorenzo since none of his counterproductive actions were intentional. He was mostly unaware of the negative impact his leadership style and relationship skill deficits were having on the team. He genuinely wanted everyone on the team to be successful, but he was working from the assumption that as the technical expert, he needed to have all the answers and that his role was just to tell the team what to do and how to do it.

After assuring Lorenzo that his situation was not unique, we began to work on implementing a six-step leadership action plan from a blueprint process I created to build relationship skills in leaders. To his credit, Lorenzo embraced the need to learn these new skills that were foreign and initially uncomfortable for him. He recognized and acted on the realization that being an ambitious and driven technical expert was not enough to be a successful leader. He embraced the leadership blueprint process that helped him build his relationship skills, and he practiced those skills and perfected them over several months. Along with help from his team, Lorenzo began to evolve into the type of leader everyone wants to have and to be.

Several years after this leadership learning experience, Lorenzo is extremely successful as the director of engineering for the entire organization. And the most noteworthy part of Lorenzo's experience is that although he is still viewed as a technical expert in his field, he will readily tell you that his relationship and leadership skills have allowed him to progress the most in his career.

ORGANIZATIONS SABOTAGING THEIR  
OWN EFFORTS FOR SUCCESS

Lorenzo's experience demonstrates that operational and technical expertise alone are not enough to be a great leader. In fact, an overwhelming amount of research has demonstrated that a leader's relationship-building skills have become the most critical factor that can accelerate their success or hijack it. Today's leaders are faced with a dire need to address the human systems in their organizations. Still, most are ill-prepared to do so because organizations resist training to build human system expertise in their leaders. But why?

The most common roadblock to leaders receiving the training they need is a view that leadership skills, and more specifically relationship skills, can't be trained. The perception is either you possess these skills or you don't. On the surface, this seems to be a valid argument. It *appears* reasonable because of what I call "the two-hour solution approach." It's true that you can't solve a leader's relationship skill deficits in a two-hour course on relationship fundamentals. In contrast, a two-hour class on learning some technical aspects of the job, for example, hydraulic fundamentals, might work fine. Training in technical and operational systems is typically more accessible and faster to address. Further, they represent a comfort zone for most organizational leaders.

Attempts at the two-hour solution for human system challenges invariably fail, leading to the belief these skills can't be learned. For this reason, most organizations allocate their resources of time and money to ensure their people are trained and proficient in the technical systems,

## WHY TO LEADERS STRUGGLE?

but not the human system. Solutions to problems in the technical arenas can frequently be solved easily, simply, and quickly. In contrast, the human system operates in perceptions, beliefs, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. Solutions to problems of this nature are challenging, complex, and take time to address. However, as organizations cast a blind eye to training that addresses the human system and fail to provide the time and resources needed to train for these skills, they inadvertently sabotage their long-term success.

Further, organizational resistance to training leaders in relationship skills creates a host of problems for leaders who must scramble on their own to find solutions without the proper preparation and tools. These problems are magnified by the fact that leaders are not only ill prepared to deal with the challenges of the human system, but they also find these challenges so uncomfortable to confront that they frequently avoid them. In liaison with an organizational culture of ignoring these challenges, they hope these human system problems will go away on their own. This is an unfortunate, avoidable problem since their discomfort in addressing many human system needs usually comes from lack of the proper tools to deal with those needs.

## WHERE WE'RE HEADED

To make matters worse, failure in organizations to dedicate resources to improve human systems runs even deeper. *Most leaders are placed in their roles with only a superficial understanding of their own personal human system that drives their leadership.* As Bill George, a Harvard leadership professor, former Medtronic CEO, and author of the

book *True North: Emerging Leader Edition* points out, most executives don't truly understand what makes themselves tick as a leader, let alone understand the human system dynamics of their entire team.<sup>2</sup> Granted, the task of self-reflection and self-discovery to develop greater self-awareness as a leader is not for the faint of heart. It can be challenging, uncomfortable, and takes time. But leadership is not about being comfortable. It requires getting out of your comfort zone to grow and evolve.

Deficits in self-awareness in turn creates in most leaders a grave misunderstanding of how they can motivate others. While pay and benefits are important, there are human system factors that, when properly leveraged, create levels of discretionary effort from your team that you can't buy or coerce from them in any other way.

Further, misunderstanding how to motivate others causes leaders to botch communications with their teams by doing the exact opposite of what neuropsychological research shows works best.

Communication misfires then lead to poor collaboration, which is compounded by an erroneous belief by some leaders that collaboration means that a team does exactly what the leader tells them to do. From this perspective, opposition to a leader's ideas is paramount to insubordination. These leaders fail to understand the value and importance of encouraging resistance from their team. At the same time, these leaders ignore or avoid addressing the negative impact of team conflicts on results.

When collaboration suffers, and conflict goes unchecked, the ability of a team to adapt to change is negatively impacted.

## WHY TO LEADERS STRUGGLE?

Additionally, most leaders approach change from a strictly intellectual and technical perspective. While not wrong, this approach is incomplete. Failure to address the emotional perspective that the human system demands have doomed more change initiatives than any other factor.

Perhaps most importantly, as if all the above was not enough, too many leaders approach everyone on their team as if they are wired the same and need to be led in the same manner. The reality is one size does not fit all regarding leadership style and approach.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

You can only achieve your responsibility as a leader by balancing attention and expertise within the technical and operating systems with awareness and knowledge within the human system. The bottom line is that organizations rely on the human system to make the technical and operational systems effective. Ignoring human system challenges because they can't be solved in an easy, simple, fast manner is a harbinger of dysfunction and eventual failure for those leaders, teams, and organizations.

Research from neuropsychology has clearly demonstrated that with the right approach, human system skills can be trained. This has led to a growing number of leaders and organizations recognizing the importance of addressing the human system despite all its complexities. Congratulations on being part of that movement! While some leaders eventually get it right intuitively, intentionally achieving that balance is much more efficient, effective, and predictable.



## IGNITE YOUR LEADERSHIP

In the next chapter, we'll cover an overview of the basic concepts for a blueprint to build human system expertise. This blueprint identifies and connects the components of a proven process to ignite your leadership and optimize team performance. It's the same blueprint Lorenzo followed. However, it takes the right approach from the beginning to obtain the best results.