



LEADERSHIP BY DESIGN: TOOLS FOR LEADING

BY PHIL HANSEN

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

Proverbs 18:2

We've all heard individuals refer to someone as a born leader. Many people assume that leadership is some inherent quality tied more to persona than to a combination of character and carefully practiced skills. In reality, those who think they're good leaders because they were born with the requisite gifts probably aren't as good as they think they are.

Truly effective leaders model the way for others, building on a foundation of strong character. They work to design and generate outcomes, and along the way they study the art of leadership, assemble a leadership "toolbox," and take deliberate steps to continually improve their own performance and effectiveness. This article will focus on listening as one of those leadership tools, and it will close with a few thoughts on the leader's mandate to continually seek self-improvement.

THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY AND ACTIVE LISTENING

Too many with command authority seem to believe that by virtue of their rank or position, they have some obligation

to tell everyone what to do on a nearly constant basis. As leaders, we tend to view ourselves as senders of information, but it is equally important, if not more so, to act as receivers. The difficulty with listening to others is that it often involves setting our own egos aside. This can be especially true in a field like tactical operations, which is largely populated by strong, type-A personalities. The paradox of authority and listening is that the more rank and/or responsibility we're given, the more we're tempted (and sometimes expected) to do all the talking, when what we need to do is to make greater efforts to listen to our subordinate personnel.

Active or artful listening requires focus and conscious application. It's about listening to understand others and not just to respond to them. It also requires that you stay open-minded to the perspectives of others so you can weigh their perspectives against your own to craft the best possible courses of action. There's an important distinction that should be made here. The conscious practice and application of active listening is a tool for leaders to understand and develop shared perspectives with those you lead. It's

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not some disingenuous form of manipulation or motivation to simply convince others that you care about what they have to say.

“Moral and effective leaders listen to their followers because they respect them and because they honestly believe that the welfare of followers is the end of leadership, and not that followers are the means to the leader’s goals.”¹ Listening to your personnel is the most effective way to communicate your respect for them. Relationships require constant maintenance and knowing that you will carefully listen to and evaluate their ideas will have great impact on your followers.

We all have different approaches to leadership, so if this relationship stuff sounds too warm and fuzzy for you, there also are countless practical, pragmatic reasons to hone your active listening skills. Regardless of your experience and expertise, whether in the field or in the office, solid decision-making is usually predicated on solid intelligence and situational awareness. By the same token, sub-standard decision-making is usually predicated on a lack of those factors, due to poor listening and poor inquiry. Listening provides the leader with context, affords the opportunity to weigh differing perspectives, and allows the leveraging of bright minds within your staff. In effect, active listening is a force multiplier for leaders in their continuing struggle to make good decisions.

“The average person suffers from three delusions: (1) that he is a good driver, (2) that he has a good sense of humor, and (3) that he is a good listener.”² Active listening and powerful inquiry don’t come naturally. They require conscious practice and application, especially in the midst of our hectic work lives. Try to remember that until relationships are developed, it can take time and patience before others are willing to open up to you completely. With that in mind, try to hold off on expressing your own opinion on an issue before allowing others to express theirs. Remember that as the figure in authority, you will set the tone for the conversation; once you’ve stated your own opinion, others will be hesitant to express a differing viewpoint, regardless of its validity.

ATTEMPTING TO PRACTICE WHAT I PREACH

Within a year of retiring from a long and rewarding career with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Depart-

ment (LASD), I was fortunate to be recruited to serve as a commander with the Santa Maria (CA) Police Department (SMPD). At the time, the SMPD was going through a difficult period that involved severe internal upheaval. The department had a new chief who is an excellent leader in his own right. Together, we perceived a palpable need for leadership to provide a sense of equity, stability and direction for the agency.

When arriving in this new environment, the easiest and in my opinion worst thing we could have done would be to just start giving orders and spend our ensuing years telling people what to do, based solely upon our own perceptions and experience. To be sure, we were quick to address systemic shortcomings and policy issues, but we always endeavored to do so with substantive input from within the organization. A leader must have context to make appropriate decisions, especially in a new assignment.

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There’s never been any doubt that my time with the SMPD is destined to have a limited shelf life. After all, I’m getting older, and from a law enforcement perspective, I’m already very high-mileage. I may have been capable of making effective decisions based on my own experience and acumen, but they may not have been the very best of decisions when made without context, and they certainly wouldn’t have had the same buy-in among the rank and file as decisions that are made with input from subordinate personnel. I am extremely fortunate to have wonderful, bright, ethical young people working under my direction. Collectively, they possess insights and intelligence I could never amass on my own. Therefore, it would be foolish to make substantive decisions without their input and perspective. Even more important, they are the future of the department, and they will learn and mature as leaders by taking part in the decision-making process.

Together, we listened to our personnel and forged common, value-based goals for the future of the agency. Whenever we craft new and significantly different policies and procedures, we take time to personally communicate and discuss the rationale behind those changes with our personnel at large; in return, their support has been remarkable.³ As a result, when I go home at night, I rest assured that my sergeants and lieutenants will make good judgment calls in my absence, not in the interest of self-promotion or out of fear of reprisal, but because we share the same understanding of policy and aspirations for our organization. Just as important,

I know that when I choose to move aside someday, they'll be capable of stepping in without reservation to elevate the organization to the next level.

LEADERSHIP AS A DYNAMIC ART

Just as leadership implies movement or change (as in leading others to a better place), a leader must continually change by seeking self-improvement. Leading is a word that implies action and movement, lending credence to the old adage, "What got you here, won't get you where you want to go." One can't just achieve the status of "good leader" and stop there. To my way of thinking, that's one of the things that clearly distinguishes leadership from management. You may be able to manage personnel to achieve minimum standards, but it's no way to lead them.

Frankly, this can all be a struggle at times. There are days when some of us may say to ourselves, "I've been doing this for years. At this point, do I really need to keep up my reading, education and effort to improve my leadership skills?" The answer is, of course, an emphatic "yes!" Our personnel are engaged in a demanding, dangerous and highly scrutinized occupation. It is our duty to lead them in the most

thoughtful, supportive and competent manner possible. In the final analysis, their safety and success will determine just how successful we've been at accomplishing that task. ■

ENDNOTES

1. O'Toole, James. *Leading Change: The Argument for Values-Based Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, 1996.
2. Sample, Stephen B. *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*. Jossey-Bass, 2002.
3. For more on the dynamics of communicative leadership, see "Leading Through Communication," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2014.



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