

Awakening Leaders

They cultivate three abilities.



by Miles Kierson

EINSTEIN SAID, "EVERYTHING should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." I have been gifted with the ability to reduce things to their simplest. I say *gifted with the ability* because it is not something that I purposely developed or had as a goal. On the plus side, I sometimes can give a different and clearer view of an apparently thorny issue; on the negative side, sometimes people will hear what I have to say, and it seems so obvious to them that they say, "I already knew that." I usually ask them, "Yes, but did you know that you knew that?"

You probably already know what I have written here about leadership, but perhaps you have not seen it organized the way I have done it, and perhaps you will see something in a new way. It is a challenging task, saying something about leadership that is new or different.

Let me introduce some *practical definitions*, meaning definitions that are *useful* in a particular context. A *leader*, in the context of organizations, is *someone who can be counted on to create the future*. What this means is that a leader interacts with his or her everyday life—the events, the circumstances—in a way that furthers or intends to further the movement in the direction that the entity which they are leading is going. Whatever occurs, the leader uses it to move forward. It requires an awareness *in* the present of what the future is that the entity has declared they are moving toward, as well as an awareness *of* the present—what is occurring, what thoughts he is having, and what he is saying. Leaders have tremendous impact on the people around them—an impact caused by what they do, what they say, and even what they think. The leader has a moment-by-moment responsibility for the impact he is having, and this requires an acute awareness of external reality and his responses to it. In any moment, he can either be furthering

or hindering the enterprise's possibility of success toward the future to which it aspires. In any given moment he is either forwarding the vision or perpetuating the status quo.

So the first ability of a leader must be her ability to be aware. To be aware means to be awake, and most of us are asleep most of the time. In our habitual way of being, we are lost in our thoughts, in our emotions, in our evaluations about reality, in our fears. We are asleep to life! It is the old "stop to smell the roses" notion taken a step or two further. We are missing life, it is passing us by, but we are asleep to it. We think we are awake and then we suspect there is something we are missing but we cannot seem to be able to quite figure out what it is.



The leader, though, must be awake. She must be awake enough to be able to see what is going on in her world and inside of her, and enough to then be able to choose the future that she sees is possible. To be awake is not an absolute state, it is an unfolding, and so I am using the term *Awakening Leadership* to describe it, not *awakened leadership*. For a person to be an effective leader, then, they must be willing to be awake and awakening.

Often I am asked, Does an effective leader need to be a visionary?, and the answer is no, if to be a *visionary* means you have to be able to envision new futures. The answer is yes if being a *visionary* means you have to be committed to accomplish a future and keep things moving in the direction of that future. Another practical definition: *Vision is what you see in the future*. To be a great leader, you do not necessarily have to see it, but you must be committed to it (and seeing it certainly helps).

I had organized and was facilitating a two-day session with a client executive team, with the objective of their creating and aligning on a vision. The CEO entered and announced that his father had passed away the night before, that he was going to the funeral to take care of family matters, that the session should go on without him, and that he would be committed and aligned to whatever they came up with. He left; we continued. When he returned, he completely owned the vision that his team had articulated and became a brilliant and tenacious spokesperson for that vision, which led to extraordinary success for that company. A great leader? You bet.

The second ability of a leader is to gain the alignment of the people around him. I am using the word *alignment* rather than the term *buying in* purposely. *Alignment*, in my practical definition, means *ownership*, which is more than just buying in. You own your house; you might buy into a vacation condo. It is obvious which one requires more of your commitment. As a leader, you do not want yes-persons or part-time owners; you do want people who are completely committed, as you are, to the fulfillment of wherever you say you're going as a company. To gain real alignment is a tricky: it takes authentic dialogue, straight talk, and trust. But it is certainly worth the effort. Effective leaders will do what they need to do to gain it.

The third ability of a leader is to ensure that the organization has the intent, resources, structures, and wherewithal to succeed in its journey to the fulfillment of the vision. There are many aspects of this that need to be taken into account, and obviously the leader cannot do it all. He needs the energy and the willingness and the dedication of all management as well as the rest of the employees. Most importantly, he needs to be able to enable and ensure that the organization is equipped to *focus* on what needs to happen to be successful. For effective implementation, focus is everything.

The leader is someone who is continuously creating the desired future: moment-by-moment making the choices to act in accordance with creating that future. She needs to be awake and awakening. She needs to gain the alignment of the people around her. And she needs to ensure that the organization can sustain focus over time. **LE**

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