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## strategies

### leadership

#### Leadership is about Doing the Hard Thing

By Lloyd A. Perlmutter

**Nobody ever told** me it was going to be easy.

Leading human beings in any endeavor is, as Warren Bennis is famous for saying, like "Herding Cats". At the end of the day, leadership is about being true to who you are and being totally honest about yourself, about the circumstances in which you and your organization find yourselves and about being brutally honest with the people around you.

Being brutally honest is hard. It's hard because the real truth is often highly critical or unpleasant as reality bites sometimes. One of the hardest lessons we learn as a child is to say "sorry" and apologize for something we did not know was wrong. Once we were taught it was wrong (usually in the moment and usually by our parents), we were then "forced" to own up to the mistake and apologize. This was the first sign of our accountability. I remember how difficult I found admitting my mistake and actually spitting out the word "sorry" face to face with someone I had hurt.

As sympathetic beings, we are deeply affected by the truth. Why else is it usually described as "cold and hard"? We try and avoid bad news and we tend to attempt to find the good in most everything and everyone. These are admirable traits especially since there are close to 7 billion of us sharing the same planet. As leaders, it is incumbent upon us to be optimistic, positive and constructive. At times, we need to be cheerleaders, cajolers, coaches and psychologists. We need to see the potential in people before they even realize it in themselves and that takes a certain amount of optimism and positivity.

But when you boil it down to its core, leaders need to be realists on an hourly basis. In order to make the right decisions, determine the optimal direction and focus for their organization, leaders need to be able to "handle the truth". Not only that, they need to actually seek it out in a dispassionate, almost clinical way. In this terabyte per second world we live in, the truth is not easy to come by. There are distractions and slights of hand every hour of every day. Finding the truth and being honest is harder than ever.

It may be against our nature to avoid "bad" news but it can turn us into reality avoiders if we are not careful. Leaders, especially, need to ensure their antennae are attuned to what is fact and what is not. They must verify and authenticate. They must be able to confront their worst fears and stare down catastrophe. They must act rationally and calmly in the face of this adversity. Some leaders have a harder time accepting good news. This is equally difficult for some hard driving leaders but they must be able to recognize good work when they see it and praise those who are responsible.

We so often hear the phrase "The hard thing and the right thing are often the same thing". This sums up the difference between highly effective and less effective leadership. I know of leaders who create their own reality and then lead their organizations to follow the wrong paths, usually over a cliff. Leaders must put people and systems in place that can provide accurate and timely assessments of their business and their organizational effectiveness and a realistic appraisal of the state of the industry and the economic environment. This is the only way they can be truly informed and effective themselves.

Next time you sign up for a leadership assignment, ensure you steel yourself for "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"...

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