THE SELF CONTEXT: YOUR ROLE IN CREATING MEANINGFUL WORK

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine your work life five years in the future. What are you doing and where are you doing it? Now answer this question: *Would you be satisfied doing the same job, contributing at the same level, using the same degree of education and level of skill, and making the same amount of money in five years as you do today?*

The most frequent answer to this question is a resounding *No*. Not surprising. But what may be a surprise is the answer we hear when we change the question to: *Would you be satisfied doing the same job, making the same contribution, using the same degree of education and level of skill, but* making more money? The answer is still *No*.

We discovered that most people express a need to improve their competence, enhance their level of contribution, and experience personal and professional growth—regardless of the money issue. Contrary to a popular belief that people resist change, perhaps even fear it—most people *embrace* the prospect of change. We are willing to bet that *you* aren't resisting change either—and may even be *hoping* for change to happen! (Perhaps sooner, rather than later.)

Consider this: *People don't resist change; they resist being controlled*. People don't fear change; they fear not having a hand in creating the change they

realize must happen over time. Most people desire development, growth, and an opportunity to be an architect of the change they know is inevitable. So why the big deal over change in the workplace? Unfortunately, too many people don't realize that being an architect of their own change requires determination and skills—so rather than taking the initiative to forge their own future, they often flounder as their boss, their organization, market conditions, and industry ups and downs determine their fate. The workplace is filled with victims waiting for a rescue that may not come. This is why learning to lead in the Self Context is critical for acheiving leadership genius.

> *Leading in the Self Context is having the skill set and the mindset to accept responsibility and take the initiative for succeeding in your work-related role.*

The first essential acts of leadership take place in the Self Context. Mastering self leadership enables you to establish positive conditions in the present and design a future that lives up to your aspirations—no matter what your position in the organization. It will also provide a foundation of understanding to lead direct reports, teams, organizations, or alliances more effectively. How can you expect to effectively lead others toward their vision and in pursuit of their goals if you are not effectively leading yourself? Leading in the Self Context begs the question: *How do I, as a self leader, empower myself and get what I need to succeed in my role?*

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SELF LEADERSHIP

Don't get the idea that self leadership is self-serving. It is your energy to initiate, motivation to learn, commitment to succeed, desire to contribute, ability to produce, and your passion for work that enables your organization to fulfill its potential and sustain its success. Unfortunately, many organizations don't *get* the importance of self leadership.

SELF LEADERSHIP AT WORK—THE KEY TO ENGAGED EMPLOYEES

A popular bit of recent research reveals that only 20 percent of almost two million workers in the U.S. claim their strengths are in play every day, indicating that most organizations operate below 20 percent capacity.[1] It's even more dismal for workers in countries outside the U.S.[2] The research claims that fewer than 80 percent of workers are engaged in their work—19 percent

are *actively disengaged*—signifying that their contributions are significantly diminished and they may thwart or even sabotage organizational efforts. The remedies recommended most often for re-engaging workers rely on organizations and managers to do something different. But consider what might happen if the focus shifted to fostering self leaders who make it their *own* responsibility to put their strengths in play every day. Imagine a workplace full of self leaders finding ways to contribute in spite of being hamstrung by bad systems, coping with organizational dinosaurs, or suffering with an incompetent manager.

It just makes sense that every organization *should* develop self leaders—yet this is usually the most underfunded and undervalued aspect of leadership training. (Is this a result of believing that training efforts are most valuable when directed to those who hold formal leadership roles or based on a fear of employees knowing too much? An interesting, but divergent question.) The fact is the lion's share of money and effort in most organizations is earmarked for training high-potential leaders who are taught how to delegate responsibility—to pass the ball, so to speak. But woefully little is allocated to teaching the rank and file how to catch the ball and run. (Let alone, how to *take* the ball and run!)

Unwittingly, organizations are paying a high price for failing to appreciate and respect the significance of the Self Context. Our stance is this: Employee engagement suffers because organizations depend on managers to engage employees, rather than developing self leaders who recognize their responsibility and have the skills to take initiative for success in their role. What if employees didn't wait to be empowered—but empowered themselves?

SELF LEADERSHIP AT WORK—THE KEY TO EMPOWERMENT

If more employees had the skill set and mindset to accept responsibility and take the initiative for success in their work-related role, they wouldn't have experienced the painful failure of the empowerment movement of the '80s that lingers even today.[3] Organizations intent on reducing overhead, purging dead weight, and becoming lean and mean use downsizing, rightsizing, and too often capsizing, to eliminate layers of bureaucracy with the hope of pushing decision-making and autonomy down the ranks. They still call it empowerment and promise you power, authority, and a sense of ownership in your work. Organizations still trust that empowerment is a way to meet the demands of being fast, flexible, and competitive in the new world marketplace.

But almost everyone discovers an interesting paradox as they cope with the chaos that ensues in the wake of their organization's latest empowerment movement: Although you may live in a democracy, you don't necessarily work in one. Despite the intentions to empower people, grant decision-making, and grant autonomy, most organizations don't come close to honoring the democratic approaches that enable empowerment.[4] Many military can probably relate to the adage, "We are here to defend democracy, not practice it!"

The bottom line is: You won't find empowerment thriving in most of today's organizations—no matter how you define it. If you define it as managers' willingness to give up control and decision-making authority—it's clearly not alive and well. Define it as the organization creating systems and best practices that decentralize controls and embrace self-directed teams with true power—you'll find it's clearly not supported. Define it as individuals feeling autonomous; free to do their best work, and control how their job is performed—it simply doesn't exist.

The significance of self leadership is this: *Empowerment is a concept; self leadership is what makes it work.* Empowerment can't exist, won't work, and is meaningless without self leaders—people who possess the ability, energy, and determination to accept responsibility for success in their work-related role. And when formal empowerment systems are nonexistent, a self leader will innovate, produce, and thrive by taking initiative. But, empowerment often dies from neglect because leaders don't foster, focus on, or follow through on self leadership training. Skill development is necessary for empowerment to be realized.

Managers and others in leadership roles are not the only ones to blame for the lack of self leaders in the workplace. Individuals—would-be self leaders—failed to embrace the opportunities and possibilities of empowerment. Why? Too many of them are still waiting for someone else to give them the power. For empowerment to take hold, potential self leaders must overcome the victim mentality, take responsibility for their own success, and ask for what they need. They must stop blaming systems, managers, or circumstances for creating unfavorable conditions. The victim mentality is the greatest obstacle to empowerment.

At lunch one day, a high-placed colleague of ours was complaining that the goals set by his boss were unfair and uninspiring. We chastised him for being a victim—in a loving way, of course. We reminded him that even though he was a leader of others, he also had the responsibility and the skills

to be a self leader. He could and should challenge or reframe the goals. That afternoon, he knocked on his manager's door and made a case for reframing the goals. The manager not only agreed, but expressed relief because he had been stumped on how to deal with other sales managers who had the same issues with their goals.

Our colleague experienced the old axiom that *authority is 20 percent given and 80 percent taken*. When you practice self leadership, empowerment is the by-product.

THE CHALLENGE OF SELF LEADERSHIP

Of course, the greatest challenge of leading in the Self Context is being willing to master the skill set and mindset required to accept responsibility and take initiative for your own success—that's one-fifth of the reason we wrote this book.

It's also a challenge to hold the tensions of your own needs in balance with the expectations of your manager (or board of directors), teams, organization, and alliances. A creative instructional designer tells the story of having her innovative training designs rejected by the company's CEO with the following explanation, "Your problem is you keep creating nine-ton elephants and we only have two-ton cages." With that feedback, the designer realized she had three choices—she could push the envelope and create "out of the cage" designs that would get rejected; she could recognize the limits of the organization and work within them; or she could meet the organization's current needs while trying to help it begin to build bigger—and better—cages. Eventually, she found herself taking all three approaches, depending on the project, the risks involved, and her frame of mind.

Self leadership is a constant balancing act between your needs for expression and your organization's need for productivity; your need for autonomy and control and your organization's need for you to be a follower; your need to pursue a vision and goals that are meaningful to you and your organization's need to have a workforce dedicated to its vision and goals. To develop as a self leader, you need to have the skill set and the mindset to meet both your needs and those of the organization you serve.

Truth is, as a self leader, you will eventually face those three choices: do it your way, do it the organization's way, or do it in a way that helps the

organization grow, change, and improve over time. Self leadership ultimately comes down to the famous Serenity Prayer—you need the serenity to accept those things you cannot change, the courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference.[5]

THE PROMISE OF SELF LEADERSHIP

A common lament is: *The problem with being a self leader is that when something goes wrong, there's no one else to blame*. It's true. The burden of responsibility for self-development and success in your role falls on you, the self leader. But, the personal and professional rewards of being able to respond to challenges through your insights, skills, and actions are worth the effort—that's the *promise* of self leadership.

As a self leader, you will benefit from increased marketability (because you have the skill set and mindset to tackle and master new skills faster); you will benefit from diminished dependence on an ineffective manager (because you have learned to manage up to get what you need); and you will benefit by becoming a better leader of others (because you learned by leading yourself that good leadership comes from the inside out).

We have the testimonials of hundreds of self leaders who are enjoying the fruits of their self leadership—from the young author who took the initiative to set goals and create the conditions necessary to land her first book deal and an $80,000 advance; to the shy, introverted lowly-placed computer geek (his own description) who took the initiative to set up a training course on computer graphics and now manages 26 people in the graphics department of a major printing company; from the woman who expressed her desire to help physically abused women and was rewarded when her company and co-workers gave her support financially and emotionally to make the leap to managing a half-way house; to the young man with dreams of being a filmmaker who now runs an in-house media center for his company. We also have the simple stories of self leaders who now find it easier to relate to their boss, or who have accepted the reality of their organization and found ways of coping without losing their souls, or who have discovered how to appreciate opportunities for growth wherever they find them on a daily basis.

For your organization, the promise of self leadership is a rejuvenated and re-energized workplace that is living up to its people's potential. The promise to you as an individual is experiencing your vision and possibilities for your work-related role as you pursue self-determined goals.

But the most compelling reason to take on the mantle of self leadership is to live a more meaningful, purpose-filled existence—at least as it relates to your career. Nearly 75 percent of the time that you are awake is connected to work. It is critical to be conscious and conscientious about what work is and how it's done. What a shame to fall victim to circumstances—*I can't get what I need, my boss doesn't understand me, the organization's systems don't work, I don't have the resources I need, my job doesn't use my strengths, they don't appreciate me, there's no room for me to grow, they don't know what I could be doing if only given the chance.* Master the skills of self leadership, and you experience liberation from the perceived tyranny of organizational life. The good news is that what's good for the organization can be good for you and vice versa.

A fundamental belief of Contextual Leadership is that excellence in one context creates a positive ripple effect in the others. Learning to lead in the Self Context is like dropping a small stone in a still lake and eventually hearing the gentle waves break on shore. Our message to you is this: In a world desperate for effective leadership, you need to begin in the most obvious place—yourself.

ENDNOTES

1. Buckingham and Clifton, 2001 (6); Buckingham and Coffman, 1999 (28).

2. Flade, Peter, "The Workforce Lacks Inspiration" (New York: *Gallup Management Journal*, 2003).

    This article reports that the United States has a sadly disengaged workforce (56% not engaged; 17% actively disengaged) but still leads most industrialized nations such as Canada (60%; 16%), Japan (72%; 19%), Great Britain (61%; 20%), and France (57%; 31%).

3. The *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Volume 37, Number 1, March 2001, Special Issue: *History of Workplace Empowerment*.

4. Ibid.

5. The Serenity Prayer is often attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr. Sydney
    Hook, author of *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (San
    Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1987) names German philosopher
    Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782) as the author of the
    original version *Tranquilitat*.