THE FIVE SKILLS OF GREAT LEADERS

Men of genius themselves were great only by bringing all their power to bear on the point on which they had decided to show their full measure.

~ Antonin-Dalmace Sertillanges, The Intellectual Life

One day in 1671, Christopher Wren, at the time the most famous architect in the world, came across three bricklayers working to rebuild St. Paul’s Cathedral after it had burned to the ground following the Great Fire of London. Wren asked them each, “What are you doing?” The first said he was laying bricks, and the second said he was building a wall. The third man said, “I am building a great cathedral.” The story left me wondering if, in the same way a giant load of bricks can be assembled to create a great cathedral, there is a set of building blocks to leadership, each one simple, which together could build the equivalent of a cathedral?

Having directly observed hundreds of successful leaders, I reject the theory that entrepreneurs are born a certain way. This does not suggest that every so often an Abraham Lincoln or Steve Jobs enter the world stage. But these exceptions are of little use to the tens of thousands of the rest of us who want to lead our organizations through ordinary times. A Google search for “characteristics of entrepreneurs,” creates over 350 million results, most of which are platitudinous: creative, passionate, motivated, resourceful, confident, and dedicated. These lists suggest a personality type. You either are the right variety, or you’re not. But how can that be true given the enormous personality variation within the body of skilled entrepreneurs and leaders. Some are terrible public speakers, while others earn standing ovations. I know as many successful leaders who present as introverts as extroverts. These bromides imply that what you need to succeed are a set of attributes, mostly awarded to you at birth, and the rest comes to you naturally. Not only is this inaccurate, but these short-cut theories lead some to believe they already have the “right stuff,” seducing them into bypassing the hard work of learning, and then applying, a set of skills.

The second trap most emerging leaders fall into is the belief that leadership is about doing more of the same. But leading is different than doing; let me explain. Most of us begin our careers as
individual contributors. In such a role, our success or failure is measured almost exclusively by what we alone produce—a great presentation, for example, or closing a sale.

As individual performers, we have near-complete control over our work-product. To do well, we need only to work harder; or as my colleague at Stanford Business School, Graham Weaver, says: “Hit the more button.” Your value is measured by your individual wit and effort.

But for most of us, at some point we’re asked to manage a department or a small team. Here again, the More Button can get you out of a jam. For example, if one of your direct reports prepares a presentation that you’re not happy about, you can stay late at the office and fix the problem yourself.

But this solution goes away when you begin to supervise managers.

Because the “more” button isn’t scalable, you reach a point where it is impossible to personally cover for the deficiencies of others. Even if you could clone yourself, or add more hours to the day, you can’t routinely bypass one of your managers by directly supervising the work of his or her direct reports—not if you want to preserve the integrity of your organization. It is this step in your career, managing other managers, where I observe that leaders fail most often.

At Stanford Graduate School of Business, I’m exposed to prize-winning economic theories. I’m surrounded by bookcases with best-selling business books that suggest a single, high-altitude unifying theory of leadership, or offer hundreds of pages on single subject (neither of which I believe are right). The theory-books feel to me like shortcuts, never offering concrete steps to improve my daily leadership. And the single subject books take hundreds of pages to convey a single chapter’s worth of information.

I became obsessed instead with the idea that the answer to great leadership, making the leap to managing managers, lies with a set of sometimes dull, yet easily attainable skills, which could each
be explained in a dozen or so pages. I have identified five skill areas, and within each, a set of sub-skills. Learn and practice the sub-skills, and you’ll conquer the master skills. None of them requires a degree from a top business school, nor do they involve reading thousands of pages from the latest box of business books. There are five critical skills you need to be an excellent leader, here in one book.

Before reading further, I’d ask that you take a moment to consider a world where you have a stable of bright and highly experienced advisors you trust, people you can call upon for advice to help you solve any problem you face. Next, picture each person who works for you, and then imagine every one of them consistently exceeds your expectations. Tomorrow, and every day forward, you get to work on only the most important problems, unburdened by trivia and minutia. When you go home at night, you leave work behind and recharge your batteries. Like a laser beam, your team stays focused throughout the year on the two or three most important priorities. Finally, your customers love your product. They tell others. So much so that you don’t need a great sales force because you can’t keep up with demand. Visualize that as your world. If it resembles the organization and type of leadership you aspire to, then together we have some work to do.

**Skill #1: Commitment To Building A Team**

In my course at Stanford, we generally feature a particular entrepreneur as they face a common tactical problem—in MBA parlance it’s called a “case.” But after teaching the case, these entrepreneurs generally share with my students’ insights from their journey into leadership. Not one of them has failed to list building a team as the most important priority. It’s why people with the same number of hours in the day, and days in the week, manage organizations with thousands of employees. Those running large organizations are not super-human, they’ve just learned how to attract, select, motivate, and retain great people. There’s research to support this. Former Stanford faculty member Jim Collins meticulously investigated the importance of building a team, and following five years of painstaking research, concluded:

> Those who build great organizations make sure they have the right people on the bus and the right people in the key seats before they figure out where to drive the bus. They always think first about who and then about what.1

The only solution is to build a team of great people because at some point you can’t do it all. The exciting part is that once you learn the skills of building a team – and they are skills that anyone can learn – it scales with any size organization. Building a great team is not the result of intuition or “gut feel.” It’s the everyday use of best practices around sub-skills, such as interviewing, compensation, reference checking, on-boarding, and exit interviews.

**Skill #2: Fanatical Custodian Of Time**

Top leaders and other high performers are obsessive about protecting their time. They never let others steal their valuable minutes or interrupt them with “Hey, gotta minute?” Great leaders have more, not fewer, demands on their time. Which means that working longer and harder also doesn’t scale.
All hours are not created equally. The creativity and insights that transform an organization seldom happen in blocks of time between answering emails and responding to routine requests. Which is why they manage their day in terms of quality as well as quantity. But no one gets there by thinking next week will be better or making promises in the mirror to improve. The “best of the best” use a set of skills to manage their workflow and daily routines to take full advantage of every hour spent. They structure their day so they can focus like a laser beam on the truly important problems. They aim their super-energy and attention at a single point, and end up making far better decisions, and discovering more creative insights, than those who let each day unfold naturally.

**SKILL #3: SETTING AND ADHERING TO PRIORITIES**

In the book, *The 4 Disciplines of Execution,* the authors write, “The more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish.” This is because ambitious leaders identify opportunities at a faster rate than their team can implement. While the leader’s creative mind moves at 100 mph, the organization struggles to keep up, traveling at 40 mph. Less experienced leaders get frustrated, wondering why those around them “can’t move fast enough,” forgetting that great ideas require hiring people, buying equipment, designing marketing material, building control systems—all of which takes time.

Since ideation is faster than implementation, leaders must carefully set and adhere to the right priorities, because they understand their organization can accomplish only a few things well. Focusing and aligning your organization is more than a commitment; it comes from practicing a specific set of skills.

**SKILL #4: WILLINGNESS TO SEEK AND TAKE ADVICE**

Great leaders know not to waste their time, or their organization’s time, where the answers already exist. Most of the issues you face as a leader have already been successfully met by others, tens of thousands of times. It’s okay to cheat. As a leader you can lean over the shoulder of the person in front of you and copy what they have done. And in doing so, you’ll save time and increase your chances of getting the right answer.

Nonetheless, too many early leaders let their egos interfere with their success or worry that asking for counsel shows weakness. The most confident leaders view seeking and taking advice as a powerful strategic weapon. They cultivate and nurture a circle of advisors who help them make significantly better decisions than they might otherwise do on their own. For them it’s not just about getting to the answer fast, it’s about getting to the right answer. Even if no one has faced exactly the same problem, those you reach out to will have experienced similar situations—enough for them to recognize a pattern, so they can provide useful guidance.

The best leaders are diligent about surrounding themselves with advisors who have the experience, skills, time, and bandwidth to take your call. But the will to seek and take advice is not enough. How do you build a network of advisors? How best to make use of their time? What is the difference between a coach, a mentor, and a board member? It’s not enough to promise yourself that you’ll be better about taking advice from others – the very best, the great leaders, take specific tactical steps to maximize the availability and quality of the advice they seek.
SKILL #5: AN OBSESSION WITH QUALITY

The final skill is an obsession with quality, which can only occur after you have a great team in place, strong advisors, a set of clear priorities, and a clear focus of your time. Quality is viewed by lesser leaders as the “ante,” the minimum required to get someone to buy from you. Great leaders know otherwise. They recognize that quality has enormous benefits such as pricing power; greater sales; lower customer churn; and an increased ability to attract talent. Average salespeople can easily sell a great product, but it does not work the other way around – great salespeople cannot sell an average product. It’s easier, and cheaper, to provide a high-quality product or service than to build and maintain a top-notch sales organization. But doing so is not about slogans or mission statements. There are bricks that are universal for creating a culture of quality, all of which are easily learned and implemented.

Probably no one reading this note will have built a cathedral, but a lot of us have struggled to learn to play a musical instrument. In learning piano, for example, there is a set of skills (not personality traits), that when brought together create music. To play great piano, it’s not enough to be creative and motivated. You need to know how to read music, and how to position of your fingers across the keyboard while navigating 88 black and white keys. Learning these skills represent the difference between playing Chopsticks and Chopin’s Nocturnes. The analogy captures what this book is about. The leadership version of the proper way to hold your hands over a keyboard, and the difference between a sharp and a flat.

I struggle with the word “great” in characterizing a leader. I wonder if it should instead describe becoming an “effective” or a “darn good” leader. Wouldn’t that be enough for most of us, you might ask? Well, let me share the story of Roy Halladay after he pitched a no-hitter during the playoffs. It was only the second time anyone had pitched a no-hitter during the playoffs; the prior year was 1956. A no-hitter during the playoffs is nearly impossible because the batters are so much better than in the regular season. What struck me was not what Halladay accomplished that day, but what Rich Dubee, his pitching coach, said to him as they walked across the outfield before the game. He told Halladay, “Go out there and try to be good. If you go out there and try to be good, you’ll get a chance to be great”.

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ii Covey, S, McChesney, C and Huling, J. The 4 Disciplines of Execution: achieving your wildly important goals. Harvard Press.