

LIGHT THE FIRE WITHIN



When we lead – and live – for a higher purpose than ourselves, it is as if an intense fire is ignited deep within our consciousness. We draw on this fire; it releases a surge of energy and ignites our enthusiasm. It transforms our personality to one that is truly attractive – drawing followers to us, and drawing from them their full support. Thus are long lasting results achieved.

“Champions aren’t made in gyms,” said heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, whose dominance transcended his sport. “They are made from something they have deep inside – a desire, a dream, a vision.” Conversely, Dennis Rodman, the flashy basketball player whose performance never matched his obvious potential, said, “I can score 20 points if I want to, but that is not my desire.”

The distance between those two statements, and the difference in the accomplishments of those two athletes, is the mechanism that transfigures desire into tangible deed. That is, willpower.

Willpower gets us out of bed at zero-dark-thirty. More important, it overcomes the tendency to stand pat, to let others do it, to put the tough tasks off to tomorrow. In other words, it’s resolve that leads to action, and action leads to results. It’s determination that is a vital factor in motivating others, as well: who dares say, “it can’t be done” in the face of resoluteness? In fact, what separates a leader from a follower is that a leader’s willpower burns brighter.

But why is that? Why does inner drive manifest so differently in people? Haven’t we all seen seemingly talented leaders whose accomplishments fall short while marveling how others with average skills deliver exceptional results year after year?

Executives often find this puzzling. While we intuitively sense when something is amiss, we usually ascribe performance shortfalls to circumstances – gaps in knowledge/experience or events beyond human control. We don’t see clearly that the faltering leader has somehow severed his connection between deep desire, willpower, and accomplishment. We risk making two mistakes:

1. Perhaps we have lost sight of our own connection between our purpose, willpower, and the effectiveness of our day-to-day actions. Thus, we fail to understand, via direct personal experience, the correlation of intention, motivation, and behavior; or
2. We fail to explore our leaders’ self-awareness about the core mechanism behind all human progress. When a lamp fails to turn on, we investigate whether its cord is connected to the power source; don’t we need to take a similar action when managers fail to deliver?

In both cases, what's needed is greater awareness of the connection between core purpose (desire), resolve (willpower) and behavior.

Personal desire, or purpose, is expressed in an infinite range of human aspiration. We want to get promoted, make more money, beat the competition, retire early, buy that new car. In short, we want to get ahead; and there is nothing wrong with that. Certainly, personal goals help us forge our work experience and invisibly guide our day-to-day decisions. But when ambition serves merely our own narrow interests, we unwittingly introduce hesitancy or resistance among our followers. They hold something back. Who wants their human talent to serve a leader's self-centered purposes rather than the well-being of the collective? Why should my leader's self-centered urgency become my sleepless night?

On the other hand, when we lead – and live – for a higher purpose than ourselves, it is as if an intense fire is ignited deep within our consciousness. We draw on this fire; it releases a surge of energy and ignites our enthusiasm. It transforms our personality to one that is truly attractive – drawing followers to us, and drawing from them their full support. Thus are long lasting results achieved.

Just a few months ago I was privileged to see an up-and-coming leader connect powerfully to her core purpose. When she shared her resolve, it was deeply inspiring.

In short order she has been promoted twice as her direct leader and the executive in charge of the sector have noticed her new-found determination, focus, fearlessness, assertiveness – and impact. As the executive recited, “I am totally confident she will not only do what I need over the next couple months, but also help us understand exactly what we want in the Technology Transformation role (this company will be spending hundreds of millions of dollars on SAP in the coming years), while giving others a view on her actual capabilities, which are beyond what we think today.”

So what is her purpose? She told me, “I realized that I simply love helping other people reach their potential – in other words, become great.” In her heart the technology implementation is simply a means to a far bigger end. And what is the executive's core purpose? At dinner a few months ago he stated, “My ‘worthy cause’ is developing leaders such that I have the certainty that if any of my kids (he has seven!) worked at this company, they would be well led.”

Together, their deep driving motivations fit like a hand inside a glove. In addition, when executives and leaders share purposes as noble as these, not only do they “connect” in ways that harmonize their efforts; but also, serendipitously, aliveness is fully present in their organization. Instinctively, we all want to be part of something transcendent. So I expect that these two leaders will create magic for they will show up, make decisions, draw enthusiasm from their followers – who will willingly give their best. They will prove Goethe's point that “love and desire are the spirit's wings to great deeds.”

As leaders, we have the privilege of guiding human spirit towards collective accomplishment. We have the choice of serving ourselves or a larger, more profound intent. The leader's role demands that we have an authentic answer to the question, “what's it all for?” – an answer that releases vitality in our organization.

I once witnessed a client executive frame it slightly less grandly, “Why are you here, at this company, right now?” But lately, I've been continuously surprised by the ease of the conversation that begins with the question, “What is your heart's desire?”

No matter how the issue of deep driving desire is positioned, we all have an answer, even if it's "I don't know." My college roommate was mentored by a famous trial attorney; at a dinner a few months ago, he said, "I have been depressed for the past year, and I think it is because I no longer know what my purpose is." He once had it; he lost it; he knew that he must find it again. The man is in his early 70s, working everyday, but clearly in his last act. Will his play turn out to be a tragedy, or a drama?

How does one discover one's deepest, most fundamental purpose, what mythologist Joseph Campbell called "your bliss"? The central ethic for all leaders is being on the path to self-awareness. Sages have pointed to this through the ages; volumes have been written on the subject, perhaps none as eloquent as the two-word command of the Oracle of Delphi: "Know thyself."

When we first commit to self-discovery, the feeling that is evoked is like entering a hiking trail. One is alone, but reassured in knowing that others have taken the path before -- and are even now on it, even if unseen. From time to time, you meet people who describe the track ahead and share their experiences, giving you the courage to persevere in your quest. It can be the journey of a moment, of a lifetime or even, as some believe, of many re-incarnations.

"What is your heart's desire?" Our response gives us, as leaders, the passion to see something right to the end without distraction. Our passion is under the control of our will; our will is under the control of our consciousness.

Do you wish to be great? Then cultivate the habit of *being* your intention. The higher you wish to reach, the deeper your foundation needs to be. As you cultivate the habit of striving to serve a core purpose beyond your own ego, your resolve will grow stronger. And you will be rewarded by deep happiness, even, perhaps, gratitude for you and your followers.