Forward by Edward Muzio

Nine Practices of 21st Century Leadership: A Guide for Inspiring Creativity, Innovation, and Engagement

I know, I know, you're already an expert on leadership. On *bad* leadership, anyway.

We all are. Ask any ten of us, and you're guaranteed ten anecdotes of a person in power leading poorly. Our leaders fail to delegate, and they fail to take ownership. They fail to trust, and they fail to monitor details. They fail to envision the future, and they fail to see reality. They fail to learn from others, and they fail to act as role models. Whatever our leaders may actually be doing, we're all expert at noticing when and how they fail us.

But ask those same ten people how to help a poor leader recover, or how to help a good leader improve, and things get murky pretty fast. You'll likely hear ten different answers based upon ten different sets of underlying assumptions, with the only commonality being a troubling lack of specificity. This *other* half of our leadership expertise – the part that's about *good* leadership – isn't quite as solid.

It's not our fault. Leadership isn't easy to define in the first place; the remarkable abundance of authors and publishers attempting to do so has, on the whole, further clouded the issue. Though many of their best efforts contain large nuggets of truth, their end points – and their journeys, and their assumptions, and even their starting points – vary widely.

To whom should we listen? To which theory shall we subscribe? Must a leader be an expert at guiding people through change? Must she know how to motivate and engage the masses? Must he be a visionary, seeing the future before the rest of us? Must she simply have the constitution to whip, prod, and cajole great masses of people into higher levels of productivity than they might achieve on their own? Is leadership born? Is it made? Is it the secret to our future success? Is it an obsolete notion from an age gone by?

Frustratingly, the answer seems to be yes, and no, on all accounts. One can find a source to support or refute nearly any imaginable notion about leadership. Each source has its particular viewpoint, each its loyal followers. But with so little exclusivity in the definition, so much variation in the parameters involved, and such fundamental disagreement over what we mean by the word, one wonders whether we share any practical understanding of how to become a capable leader at all. Are we forever doomed only to recognize and lament the failures of those who try?

I hope not. I've spent the better part of my career consulting internally and externally with a variety of organizations – many of them large, successful, and highly ambitious – on the twin topics of behavior and culture. In my firm, we focus on what real people actually do – what individual contributors do, what supervisors do, what managers do, and what executives do – to achieve high output at low stress. We employ a finely honed understanding of the behavioral patterns employed within the most successful organizations, pulled from decades of research regarding collaboration, communication, decision making, feedback systems, and (dreaded above all else) meetings. Our primary work is to describe, define, and import those practices into the entities we serve, helping our clients to make the behavioral patterns their own. So, we pay a lot of attention to what makes organizations succeed.

And as we do, client after client, year after year, one thing becomes ever clearer: the need for leadership at every level. Without executives taking the lead in their spheres, organizations become rudderless. Without managers taking the lead in their spheres, product delivery and company performance become slipshod. And without front-line supervisors taking the lead in their spheres, customer service and execution become substandard.

But with so many experts, so many ideas, and so little agreement, how do we find a language and definition for leadership that's practical and usable? How do we keep from getting lost in debate over which guru to follow and which theory to espouse?

Enter Gary DePaul, with a characteristically level-headed approach.

I first met Gary in early 2011. I was talking about culture with a group of leaders within the International Society for Performance Improvement, Gary among them. The society – ISPI, as members call it – is a meeting of minds around the notion that organizational solutions should solve organizational problems. In the same way that doctors diagnose before they prescribe, and that engineers analyze before they design, ISPI practitioners take pains to understand fully the desired human performance, the current state, and the most important gaps *before* they begin to consider specific solutions.

From outside, it sounds so straightforward as to be redundant. But in a world where trainers want to train, facilitators want to facilitate, organizational redesign experts want to redesign organizations, and coaches want to coach, there's tremendous power in simultaneously recognizing the value in those disciplines (and many others), while reserving judgment about which one to use until the need is clearly understood. First *begin with the present state,* then *define the need,* and then *design the solution.*

From our first encounter, Gary and I quickly recognized each other as kindred spirits in this kind of clear, analytical thinking. With his PhD in Performance Consulting and my degree in Engineering, we speak and think similarly about organizational challenges. Both of us prefer models, research, and experimental results to unfounded (albeit slickly presented) hypotheses. Neither of us cares much for HR or training programs *du jour*. We don't tie our work to "industry trends," nor does either of us subscribe to the theory that only what's new is good (or, for that matter, that only what's old is good). Instead, Gary has proven himself a thinker and analyst of the highest order in the human performance space. And while it's a gross oversimplification of a substantial intellect, I think it's fair to say that at the core of Gary's analytical horsepower lies a simple two-part question constantly begging to be answered: What has been proven to work, and how might it meet this particular need?

All of which is why, when Gary first shared with me his plans to write a leadership book, I didn't immediately ask whether he was crazy. Instead, I found myself fascinated. This isn't a man who would wade unsystematically into a sea of discordant voices just to add his own. What need did he perceive?

I'd scarcely framed the question mentally as he was answering it: Despite the huge variety of disparate opinions, we enjoy no conclusive result. We share no collective understanding of what leadership is, no common language about how to develop it, and no clear picture of how doing so successfully will benefit us. If *Leadership in the 21st Century* is so critical, we need more than disparate opinions about how to avoid failure. We need a map and a plan. We need a way forward that integrates the dissonant voices into a clear picture of what everyone can do to become better leaders – actually, specifically *DO* – here, now, and today. It's no longer enough to recognize leadership's absence; we need to encourage and engender its presence. And the way to do so, Gary explained, isn't to add another voice to the cacophony; it's to integrate the truths already presented.

Gary delivers comprehensively on his promise. First, he presents a crisp and enlightening look at various notions about leadership rampant in today's literature. This has the dual effect of cutting through the confusion and creating the basis for the rest of his book. *Begin with the present state.* Then, he presents a view of what *Leadership in the 21st Century* should look like, based upon a variety of research into human productivity. *Define the need.* Finally, he extracts from an assortment of sources a straightforward (though not easy) list of nine plainly worded behavioral practices, which the reader can employ right away or use as a framework to assess other leaders. *Design the solution.*

His language is specific, his research thorough, and his advice actionable. For my money, *Analyzing like Detectives*, the first of his nine practices, is worth the investment in the whole book. If more leaders employed this level of active attention to cause and effect in their workplaces, many organizations would improve nearly overnight. Of course, *Analyzing like Detectives* is followed by eight additional and equally valuable practices – each with tools, research citations, quotations, and examples to bring everything to life.

If you're most clear about the leadership *failures* in your organization, you're not alone. If your conversations on the subject turn to comparative debates over expert opinions, you're not alone. If you feel like your organization would benefit from less *talk* about leadership and more *actual* leadership, you're not alone. You're also not doomed. With Gary's book, you're well on your way to a greater understanding of leadership and – more importantly – some concrete steps forward, starting today.

It's time for all of us to bolster the *other* half of our leadership expertise.

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