**Purposeful Leadership**  
-- It’s not a technicality

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**Leadership**

Whew! Such a big word for just 10 simple letters (go ahead and count them now, you know you want to). So simple a term, yet seemingly difficult to execute. So easy to say, so complex to fully understand.

So, what really, then, is this leadership stuff all about? Why does it matter, who cares, and what's in it for me? What about all these differences I hear between leadership and management – is that important?

If you'll humor me a bit, I'll offer some thoughts...

First and foremost, leadership must be purposeful. People won't follow "accidental" leaders, no matter what fables you may have read to the contrary.

Admittedly, some really successful leaders are so humble and personally unassuming, yet so passionate about their vision that they don't seem to fit our personal definition of a "leader." But never, ever, assume it's "leadership by accident." It isn't.

Leaders have a vision, and that vision is very real to them, making it quite obviously purposeful. That they want to reach that vision is usually equally evident; that desire – passion if you will – translates into purposeful leadership focused on accomplishing their unique (and highly personal) vision.

Personal vision. Passionate execution. A textbook definition of leadership if ever there was one. But definitions are always the easy part; more difficult is knowing how to put those definitions – that passion and purpose – into action... to really demonstrate what it looks like.

To that end, let me offer the following:
Leadership...

...is Situational. It's not one-size-fits-all. There's no "one way" to effectively lead everyone in any single situation. It could be, I suppose, except we throw people in that mix. Those pesky employees...

People are different; cultures are different; leaders are different; the list goes on and on. All these variables mean that successful leaders must have a virtual arsenal of tools with which to work (sorry about mixing my metaphors – was in a hurry!). There is no single "12-page Guide to Leadership," whereby every time a leader needed help, s/he could simply turn to Page 4, Section II, Line three, and there would be the answer.

Alas, no such luck. If there were, I'd have written it myself, sold it for several bazillion dollars, and be living on my own private island off of Tahiti. I can't swear you would be invited.

Leadership is inherently situational – embrace the ambiguity.

... is Personal. That's right, "personal." Knock off this virtual crap – it's wishful thinking at best; damaging at worst. You can supervise from afar, though difficult; maybe even manage, though again, difficult.

But lead?? No, sorry. Leadership is personal. You've got to get in the game, roll up your sleeves, and maybe – just maybe – even get your hands dirty.

Eye contact is essential. Real trust is created from real relationships, not pseudo, half-hearted efforts, concocted in a manner most easily executed. Real relationships, contrary to match.com, aren't developed from 2-line emails.

Having said that, what can happen is that a leader can be so obviously passionate, so loud with enthusiasm for a vision that others connect and act as a de facto leader in his or her stead. A rare, but powerful, occurrence. Think Presidential campaigns. Think vision like Steve Jobs, maybe Jack Welch.

It's possible, it's quite rare, and you shouldn't bank on it.

Two more points on the personal nature of leadership...

1. Stop with the incessant attempts at automating performance reviews. We shouldn't be trying to make doing these things easier, we should be shooting for more relevant. If the performance management process was bad to start with, automating it simply makes bad things happen faster.
If you take crap, then automate it, you have automatic crap. Now, we can screw things up in record time. Why doesn't this sound good to me??

Performance reviews are evidentiary – the ending of a process for performance management (when done correctly). Isn't that the end goal supposed to be better employee performance? How in heaven's name can we convince ourselves – as difficult as we know this process to be – that automating the effort will actually produce better employee performance? How?

Well, easy answer to those questions... we can't. So, quit trying to automate something that likely isn't doing all it's supposed to right now. Simplify the hell out of it, make it more relevant to employees and managers alike, and then actually use the process to drive employee performance necessary for your organization's success.

Cutting edge thinking, eh?

If Performance Management isn't personal, I don't know what is...

2. You can't develop leaders virtually. Don't make me repeat that so it will sink in... ok, I will... you cannot develop leaders virtually. Online courses, video seminars, webinars, et al, may be decent mediums for reinforcement of existing, practiced skills, but they are positively lousy for initial skill exposure and development.

Leadership is personal. Ergo, leadership development must be personal. Not as in "private," but as in "people." Face-to-face, via coaching, personal facilitated sessions, workshops, and so on. If not, we could just give all newly promoted or assigned leaders a book, tell 'em to read it, and wish 'em luck.

Face it – we don't get excited about these distance/online learning tools because we simply love distance and online learning; we are looking for quick fixes, instant answers... shortcuts to developing leaders.

I've got bad news: no shortcuts here. Not at the development juncture, anyway.

... Looks like leadership. No one should have to tell someone that certain behaviors or actions demonstrate effective (read: "successful") leadership. People – employees – know it intuitively. Not to make a connection between leadership and pornography (hmmm...), but Justice Stewart had the right idea when he said "I'll know it when I see it."
Now, he was opining on pornography; I'm using it for leadership actions. *We know it when we see it.*

Texas-born comedian Ron White talks about his trees during one of his routines. After a hard freeze, his trees appeared all but dead. He called a tree expert (I'm sure they're called something more technical than a 'tree expert') to come replace them; this guy shows up and inspects Ron's trees.

"They're not dead," says the expert, scratching off a small piece of bark with his highly-trained thumbnail. "See here – the *core* is still alive, deep inside."

Ron tells him (using multiple expletives we'll forego here), "No, idiot, I want some trees that look alive to people that don't know s#!t about trees!"

There's a lesson in there folks: we want leadership that *looks* like leadership to those who *don't know anything* about the technicalities of leadership.

We know it when we see it, and we don't believe it when we don't. Simple equation, repeated countless times each day by those we purport to lead.

Leadership must be purposeful to be successful; it must have a demonstrated vision, with the passion and personal wherewithal to execute to that vision. All the rest – the noise, the egos, the clutter, the red herrings of office trappings, business cards, and salaries – are simply hubris.

But that's just me...