

Leading Through the Power of Community

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Do you ever wonder how past leaders could have missed what seems so obvious in hindsight? Why didn't the American military better anticipate and prepare for the post-war occupation of Iraq? Why didn't Sony better anticipate and prepare an offering to compete with Apple's iPod?

Although we don't know all of the discussions that surrounded the events cited above, we do know that most leaders live in an environment that makes them vulnerable to managerial failure. The problem lies in a little-recognized reality of leadership: isolation. Leading can be lonely. Typically leaders have few, if any, high-trust relationships at work. Because leaders have the power to make or break the careers of everyone around them, people are afraid to be open, honest and vulnerable with them and to challenge their thinking. Likewise, too often leaders are reluctant to let their guard down out of fear of losing the respect of their subordinates or colleagues.

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The natural consequence of this mutual fear to fully communicate is that it creates what we describe as Knowledge Traps, barriers that prevent leaders from hearing potentially valuable information. The world today is too large and complex for leaders to think they can make superior decisions without the benefit of leveraging the eyes, ears and minds of the members of their community who are closer to the front lines.

When leaders are isolated from the honest, candid dialogue that helps produce the best decisions, the isolation tends to make them more vulnerable to hubris and rationalization. If leaders only hear the good news that people think they want to hear, they will believe, as the emperor with no clothes did, that all is well...when in reality it is not. And of course, the negatives will eventually come to the surface, usually when it's more difficult to deal with them.

The isolation of leaders and its negative effect on decision-making is one reason why the British historian Lord Acton observed in 1887 that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." More than a century earlier, the French political philosopher Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu came to the same conclusion in his 1748 masterpiece *The Spirit of the Laws*. As a way to reduce the negative effect of power, Montesquieu recommended the separation of powers, and checks and balances in government. His solution to the pitfalls of power was embraced by America's Founders and has since become a part of the structure of liberal democratic governments worldwide.

In corporations, independent directors provide a check on the CEO's power. That's not enough, though. There are important practices that can be put in place to protect leaders at all levels from the danger of isolation. All leaders should have people in their lives whom they trust who will provide the open dialogue and constructive confrontation required to sharpen and check their thinking. Ideally, they should have at least one high-trust

relationship inside and one outside their organization. This will allow them to create an inner circle with whom to grow in life and in leadership. Additionally, leaders must develop the habit of actively seeking broad input and carefully considering the feedback they receive before making important decisions. Implementing these practices – high-trust relationships and developing the habit of broadly seeking relevant knowledge before making important decisions – at all levels will help to eliminate Knowledge Traps and restore the healthy Knowledge Flow that every organization needs to achieve sustainable superior performance.

There is a new breed of leader emerging today: the leader who is accountable and growing through the power of community. The younger generations aren't looking for know-it-all bosses but rather they are looking to be inspired by leaders who are continuing to grow themselves and inviting those they lead to grow according to their example. When we become isolated by living outside the power of community we stop growing. And as every biologist will tell you, when a living organism ceases to grow, death is imminent.

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