Career Path: Create Your Personal Leadership Philosophy

Career Development

My intent for this column is to highlight learnings I have acquired through my 45 years of working, which includes 17 years as the general counsel of four major corporations in four different industries. Key topics I intend to cover will include leadership, creating a winning culture, team building, innovation and creativity, decision-making, diversity, careers, and leading a legal team.

My first focus is leadership, which will take several columns to cover in adequate detail. Contrary to popular belief, leadership is not a position. It is a role. We all need to be able to play three roles. These include the role of leader, follower (team player), and individual contributor. And for some, there is a fourth role of supervisor or manager. Many people equate leaders to managers. I dislike that — managers manage and leaders lead. When I sit in a meeting with my CEO, I am not the leader; I am one of the team. You do not need to be a manager to be a leader. In fact, you will often find a leader of a team, or of an issue, who does not have any direct reports. But they do have followers. And like followership, leadership is a skill we all must have to be successful.

I have spent some time thinking about the essence of leadership. My favorite defining quote (there are many) comes from Harvard Business School: “Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence.” My personal belief is that in a corporate setting, leadership involves the assembling, developing, focusing, and inspiring others to effectively achieve objectives to advance the overall values, vision/mission, and strategy of the business. While Napoleon found leadership to be an innate gift, the good news for most of us is that it’s a skill that can be developed and improved over time. I am a significantly better leader today than I was 25 years ago and I have seen CEOs also improve their leadership skills over time.

With these facts in mind, what is the most important characteristic of a good leader? Because leadership is fluid, and can be improved, the best way to develop your leadership ability is through self-realization and a willingness to encourage, accept, and react to feedback. It does not matter if you agree or disagree with the feedback you receive. You simply need to understand that is how you are being perceived. The question then becomes: Do you want to address the perception? And, if so, what actions will you take to change it?

I am clearly an introvert. I feel negative energy and worn down in public settings, by presenting, or interacting with groups. Logically, I avoid those setting if possible but that also means my actions can come across as cold and non-caring. To deal with this perception, I simply have to force myself to address it. At US WEST, my first company, I got feedback that my introversion was perceived negatively. I did not believe that really was me. So I developed a series of actions to address this perception. Every Friday, I would stop at Safeway, go to the bakery section, choose 24 donuts, place them in two big trays, bring them to and from the car, up the elevator, into the office, and to the lunchroom (I hated it!). But, guess what, all of a sudden I am a warm, caring guy! Also, throughout my career, I will go down to the cafeteria and get a cup of coffee, not returning to my office until it's finished. This gives me two options. Stand in the hallway and drink it alone, which is truly my preference. Or wander around and talk to people until I am done. So trust me, there are ways to address and change perceptions, if you want to.

Being an effective leader isn't about posters, slogans, memos, PowerPoints, or speeches. Your actions must be consistent with what you believe. You need to own your actions and be very careful just following the advice of experts or consultants. If you need to hire a consultant you should ask, why does the company need me?

Keep in mind that after having the opportunity for input, it makes no sense to advise a third party that you are only implementing a decision, but that you do not agree with it. You have just totally de-empowered yourself. Why would anyone want to work with you, if the real power is above you or elsewhere? You simply have to support decisions (if legal and ethical), even if they are not the decision you would make.

I have also found there is huge value in developing and communicating your Personal Leadership Philosophy. For me, this document is two pages of bullets. It has five headings: what I believe, what I expect, what I will do, what I will not tolerate, and what makes me happy. You cannot develop your own in one sitting. You need to draft it, put it down, and come back to it several times over a couple of weeks. Don't pull a bunch of stuff out of leadership books — it has to be you. Then have someone who knows you (spouse, close friend) read it and comment. I have had my leadership team all develop their own and we have read them to each other. I have also shared it with my entire organization.

Start developing your Personal Leadership Philosophy now.

Mark Roellig

Owner

mroellig PLLC

Mark Roellig was previously general counsel of four Fortune 500 companies and now advises in-house counsel as a mentor and career coach.