

# ***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***

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## **Leading By Asking**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

In the late summer of 1962, only weeks before the Cuban Missile Crisis, I was serving on the deck force of the USS Galveston, a guided missile cruiser doing reconnaissance off Cuban waters.

A seaman apprentice, I was assigned to First Division, which was responsible for all deck operations in the forward half of the ship. There were just over 100 men in First Division, and only eight of us had a high school education. The rest had dropped out of school, most in junior high. Those of us with diplomas were commonly mocked as bookworms, simply because we had graduated.

But that story could not repeat itself today. Now the Navy has no interest in anyone without a diploma. Things have changed.

In a similar vein, the entire American workforce has changed. At the end of the nineteenth century the average worker on a manufacturing line had a third grade education. How many jobs could you fill today with only three years of schooling?

Today's workers have more education and more awareness of the world than any workforce in history. And with that change has come a demand for new styles of leadership.

### **I Say, You Do**

In the old days, with a generally uneducated workforce, the leader was looked to as the person with the answers. The person who knew how things should be done. The result was a leadership style best summed up in a line from the movie "The Karate Kid," when the old, wizened master tells his young protégé straight out, "I say. You do."

Many still try to lead using that formula. As leaders, they see themselves as the ones with the best answers. And they are quick to offer their advice. But today's most effective leaders do not lead by telling. They lead by asking. They are not so much leaders who know the right answers, but leaders who know the right questions to ask.

They recognize a great untapped wisdom that resides within those they lead, a collective wisdom that transcends the insight of even the most capable leader. Leaders who operate from this perspective put their energies into asking provocative, probing questions of their team, then listening intently to the feedback.

In *Good to Great*, as Jim Collins describes companies that attained true greatness, we see a common denominator among their CEOs. These men were skilled at tapping the collective wisdom of the organization. As leaders they devoted themselves to two things: first, assembling the right team and second, asking the right questions.

### **Extraverts Rush In**

For those who aspire to effective long-range leadership, no skill is more vital than learning to ask good questions. Equally important is being able to listen patiently and intently after the questions have been posed. Which is where the real challenge of "leading by asking" arises.

Most leaders are extraverts. In part that's because extraverts outnumber introverts 3 to 1 in our society. So it's logical for extraverts to appear in greater numbers in management positions. Not only that, when promotions are passed out, corporations tend to value the more dynamic style of extraverts over the reflective style of introverts.

Thus, the heavy representation of extraverts in leadership positions. Yet, it's extremely difficult for extraverted personalities to sit back and listen. They are "wired" to jump in, to offer their opinion, to recommend directions and cut to the chase. This, of course, is just the opposite of what a manager must do if he or she wants to "lead by asking and listening."

The overwhelming majority of the CEOs in Collins' study were introverts. In describing them, few people chose the word "charismatic," a characterization reserved typically for extraverts. As introverts, it was natural for these men to lean back and soak up what others were saying, to ponder rather than "jump in." One of the most amazing aspects of their story is how long they were willing to wait for the right answer to appear.

### **The Big Stretch**

The higher a leader's extraversion, the more he or she must stretch to "lead by asking." Collins even opines that these types of exceptional CEOs (he calls them Level 5 leaders) are more nearly born than trained. One could even conclude from *Good to Great* that there is no way to develop Level 5 leaders. We must simply wait for them to emerge.

I'm not sure I totally agree. I believe Level 5 leaders can be developed. But for most leaders – that majority of extraverts – Level 5 leadership will require them to reprogram themselves in critical arenas of personality. They will have to change some of their stripes. They will have to stretch so much that only the most highly motivated are likely to become true Level 5 leaders.

Their challenge is to internalize enough characteristics of introversion to do two things. They must first make peace with the great amount of solitude required to define the right questions, including the best way to phrase them. And second, they must master the art of being patient enough to listen . . . and listen . . . and listen until the best answer, laced with collective wisdom, makes itself known. Not an easy task. But not an impossible one, either.

Perhaps I should add that merely learning to ask and wait does not make you a Level 5 leader. Many other skills must be part of the mix. Most leaders, whether extraverts or introverts, rarely rise above Level 4, which is home to countless outstanding leaders. Many are satisfied to lead forever at that level because they see themselves as highly effective in a Level 4 environment. Even there, however, their task is to build a vibrant, enduring organization. And over the long haul one of the best ways to do so is to lead by asking.

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