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## Look in the mirror: Here is what you should see

### Top leadership skills for any great company

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One of the great things about the work we do is we get to work closely with some incredible leaders.

What has become abundantly clear, even more so in tough times, is that effective leaders know leadership is not only a gift or talent they are born with. It is also something they must practice every day if their organization is going to thrive.

As we observe great leaders all around us, it has become abundantly clear that there are five key elements of effective leadership that continue to be the bedrock of high-performance organizations. They are:

**1. People work to their talent, not to remediation.** When your child brings home a report card with grades of six As and one C, what is your first reaction? In a great organization, it would be to celebrate the As and then, eventually, talk about whether a C is reasonable or not.

Reality is that most of us would jump on the C first and talk about how we remediate that performance.

Great leaders celebrate success. They understand what their team members' talents are and how they can use and further develop those talents to ensure the ultimate success of the organization.

**2. Everyone understands his or her contribution.** Every member of the team knows and can articulate what his or her role is in the organization and how that impacts the entire team's success. At times, it is easy to believe that only those at the top of an organization provide real impact. In truth, ultimate success is a function of the work of the entire team.

Here's a bit of invaluable wisdom shared from a very astute man, John Williams — Ron's great-grandfather. John Williams served as a city councilman in Ozark, Mo. One day, a young, impressionable little boy — actually Ron Kitchens — approached John and told him how impressed he was by his importance. John's response was that of a high-performance leader.

He replied, “If I don’t do my job for a few days and the man who turns on the water doesn’t do his job, which do you think people will notice first? That tells you who is important.”

As a leader, it is your job to make sure all team members not only feel important but understand that, without their contribution, the organization would be dramatically diminished.

**3. Knowledge is king.** In a world where success is, by and large, no longer determined by geography, natural resources or tradition, it is those organizations that embrace the constant pursuit of knowledge that will succeed. We believe this speaks well for our region and the nation.

Consider, if you will, that over the last five years there have been 30 Noble Prizes awarded to Americans, while the Chinese have received one. The United States still represents 49 percent of all patents globally. This is not by accident; this success is due to the conscientious decision of leaders who value knowledge.

**4. People are held accountable.** Great organizational leaders are clear about expectations and hold everyone, including themselves, accountable to those expectations. They build an expectation of accountability that drives not only the results of the organization but also drives day-to-day operations.

A great example locally is Graphic Packaging. The company operates on the belief: “We keep promises. Each person is empowered to make the organization succeed and is 100 percent accountable for his/her actions.”

**5. We are family.** Even in these tough economic times, people will not give their all, heart and soul, to a job or an organization without soul. They will commit themselves only to leaders and a family of team members who are organized around aspirational goals. People also no longer want to be part of a “staff” but instead think of the people they spend their days with as “family.”

Enlightened leaders understand that, to meet the needs of those around them, they must focus on creating an environment where groups of self-directed team members can not only succeed but thrive.

For example, take Apple Inc. To acknowledge its best employees, Apple created the Apple Fellows program recognizing those who make extraordinary technical or leadership contributions; Apple doesn’t focus on the Cs. At Apple, everyone understands their contribution, and the company holds itself accountable.

Ever had your iPod go bad? After some quick phone diagnostics, a new one often arrives in your mailbox to replace a defective one. Knowledge is king: Apple’s entire focus is the transfer and sharing of knowledge at lightning speed — information (the Mac), your personal lifeline (the iPhone), music (the iPod), and, now, books (the iPad) — with the brand of its products transcending the products themselves.

Finally, the company operates like a family. From the beginning, Apple bucked the corporate culture and created a flat hierarchy dressed in casual clothes.

The “fruits” of Apple’s success are shown not in its 2009 worldwide annual sales of \$42.91 billion but in its being named the most admired company in the world by Fortune magazine in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

How do you like those apples — the results produced by effective leadership in a high-performance organization? Go ahead, take a look in the mirror.

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