

1.

Son Jack And Google Agree On Transparency

Maybe the greatest moments in parenting are those threshold moments—the firsts: first smile, word, step, word read out loud, or first day of school. But those first adult thoughts are especially cool. Not just the unconscious brilliance of a four-year old, but the moments of self- and other-consciousness that happen before the teen years bring on defiant challenge. On a November 2008 Saturday, during one of those great car rides, with the distractions of TV and Blackberry gone, Jack started to tell me about what really rankles him. It really annoys him when the adults in his life tell him “no” and won’t give him a reason. “I just don’t understand why they can’t give their reasons,” he said.

It made me think about when—if ever—authority is justified in answering the “Why?” that all kids and followers ask, by saying “Because I said so; that’s why.” I told him there may be times when his babysitter, or his teacher, or Jennifer or I are under so much time pressure that we won’t give a reason. Or, maybe his teacher or sitter can’t give an explanation at a moment in time, because there are hidden reasons: For example, they don’t want to embarrass someone else, or there is something in their personal needs that they just shouldn’t have to divulge. But Jack and I also agreed that followers lose respect for managers who can’t or won’t say why.

Trust grows when management explains their reasons. And trust really grows when management—in explaining their reasons—actually listens to what you’re saying, sees your point of view, and sometimes changes course as a result. Those of us who wield authority have work to do here: We have to cultivate patience to hear people out, and we have to cultivate open-mindedness to listen fully. Perhaps most of all, we have to develop the self-confidence to overcome our fear that those who challenge us may show us up, embarrass us, or stump us.

Shannon Deegan, Director of People Operations for Google, spoke at our Next Great Companies conference in November 2008. During the Q & A , a man pointed out that Google and the other renowned companies at the conference by definition had great cultures. He asked what is the central prescription Shannon would give for those Michigan companies who are *not* yet so enlightened. Shannon said: Focus on being transparent. The Google founders have a happy hour every Friday where all employees can attend—live or online—and anyone can ask anything of them. Employees get access to all the reports the chairman makes to the board. Anyone can ask any manager anything about the business strategy and decisions. Openness abounds.

So, guess what people feel like? The same thing Jack is striving for: They feel like respected adults.

At work and at home—leading your staff, your children, and your aging parents—you gain insight, trust and buy-in by being open to inquiry all the time.

Leading In Tough Times—Under Pressure

So, I've invited you to consider the possibility that someone's strange behavior may be less a product of their individual psychological makeup than the fact that there are unusual pressures in the system. I gave the example of a teen acting out, or someone blowing up at a meeting. It's easy to blame them, but it may be much more fruitful to ask: What's going on here (or in other circles they're in) that would cause them to flip out? What was implied is that systemic pressure will cause a weak link to break; pressure seeks escape.*

Today I'd suggest more broadly: Everyone—or nearly everyone—consciously or otherwise reacts to pressures and stresses on the system as a whole. And it's important to know how YOU react. If a company is in trouble, for instance, fear will generate predictable outlets: e.g., authorities will be blamed; factions will fight over perceived scarcities (of money, management's attention, etc.); personality differences that are usually tolerated will become hot spots. The well-meaning people fueling these distractions will often and unwittingly be taking focus away from the real work that's threatening the company.

The first work of leadership is to know how I—me, the one I can best control—react to pressure. Two places deserve your attention. First, are you playing the distraction games mentioned above—rumor-mongering, finger-pointing, side-taking, etc.? If so, STOP! Second, it helps to be honest about your unique and idiosyncratic responses to pressure. Most of us tend to exaggerate our behaviors, leaning upon our perceived strengths, settling into our comfort zones. For instance, I tend to retreat into the safety of big-picture thoughts, big ideas and ideals. But the group may need focus on some hard details and daily execution. Others tend to be take-control folks, and under pressure may take the situation by the throat (remember General Haig when President Reagan was shot, announcing he was in control?). Some retreat. Some charge. Some, like Mr. Spock, get logical. Others get very emotional—angry or empathetic—to the point of paralysis.

Do you know what you do under pressure? As I have often written, leaders ask not "What's habitual or comfortable for me, or what do I want?" but must always ask, "What does the group need?" Don't assume they're the same.

Economic and other group pressures will continue to accompany those who lead, so it's important to understand how you react to them if you are to lead with your best self.

Readers Lead

Katherine Crowley wrote: Great idea to have us each consider our automatic reaction under pressure. I know that I tend to become absentminded externally when I feel anxious internally. At those times, I have to really slow down and focus on what I am doing.

I'd add one more step to the process which is to do whatever you can to calm your system down. It's very hard to change your behavior when you are revved up and freaking out. The best antidote I find is doing something simple—usually exercise, or taking a walk, or saying a prayer,

or calling a friend—to release the fear and anxiety and become more grounded in the present moment.

3

Raising Kids, Picasso And Super-Leadership

Back in the late eighties when there were only around 50 or so books on leadership, a book by Sims and Manz called *Super-Leadership: Leading Others to Lead Themselves* grabbed me! By "super" they meant "really great," but they also meant super, from the Latin meaning "above," i.e., leaders above leaders. Their whole idea, which has become way more popular since then, was simple: Great leaders make followers into great leaders themselves.

I was reminded of this idea when my friend Janet Lawson told me how she really dislikes the idea of "raising kids." She says, "We don't raise chicks, puppies or goslings; we raise chickens, dogs and geese." And she wondered aloud: What would be different if we thought we were raising adults, not kids? It surely made me wonder: If someone watched my actions, heard my speech, traced my steps in the kitchen and family room and into the car, would they think my intent was to raise kids? Or adults? And what if we took it even a step further and asked, "What if we thought we were not just raising kids, not just raising adults, but raising leaders?"

Scott Blakeney, a Reading for Leading reader, loaned me *A Touch of Greatness*, a marvelous documentary about an extraordinary elementary school teacher named Albert Cullum, who taught in suburban New York in the late fifties and early sixties.*

Cullum explained how good teaching is not educating children, but educating future adults: "Teaching is pushing them away from you—through doors, different doors; not embracing them. When you embrace someone you're holding them back. Picasso really captured that in his artwork *Mother and Child*: the chunky mother balancing the baby perfectly; she doesn't hold him; he's balanced; he can go, any time he's capable of going. But he's perfectly balanced. Classroom teaching should be that. Find a secure spot for them and then they're ready to go."**

Not raising kids. Raising adults. Raising leaders. Holding them perfectly balanced, and then you push them through doors, when you lead with your best self.

Readers Lead

Tom wrote: Another appropriate translation is for the word parent—it is from the Latin word "to prepare." As you correctly state—we should be preparing our children and raising adults. Too frequently, I observe parents complaining that their student didn't excel because the teacher expected too much; their athlete didn't win the game because the referee made a bad call; or the contest wasn't won because the judge was biased. This continuous series of soft landings doesn't prepare anyone.

Proper preparation occurs by encouraging success and allowing failure, setting high standards and permitting the kids to win their own battles. It's a tough standard that I challenge myself to live up to.

4 Context And Purpose

I had two MSU freshmen on my radio show. They were graduates of a marvelous middle and high school program called the Art of Leadership.* One facet of that program is that the young people write a personal life vision statement. The first young lady told me that her vision was to bring joy into the lives of all of the people that she met. She said that even when people were negative, she would make every effort to listen to them, to help them to see the positive, and to maintain her own sense of joyfulness. It was very cool to see this young woman approaching life with a sense of purpose that was both broad yet deeply personal. I was uplifted by the vision and by the light in her eyes.

I asked the other young woman what her vision was. She said that a lot of times life is not really that great but that if you communicate and work with other people, you can actually make good things happen for them and for you. I will admit it. I felt underwhelmed. A vision statement should greatly inspire; it should hit the high note and offer hope in some lofty purpose. Our interview went on.

Later we were discussing how they became like a family in the Art of Leadership program. And the second girl quite matter-of-factly said: "Well I lost both of my parents..." She said that Denise, the program leader, had helped her face that loss and move on. These thoughts screamed in my head: "Mulhern, now are you still underwhelmed by this young lady's vision? Because when she says life isn't always that great, she knows whereof she speaks! When will you realize how misleading appearances really are?"

I took two lessons from this experience. First, context really matters. People's words truly make sense only to the degree you understand the context in their thought and their life.

I was also struck by the power of two eighteen year old women moving through life with a vision and a sense that they belong and have a unique purpose. With vision and purpose of their own, they don't have to wait for others, blame others, or even follow others. They have a direction of their own and can lead. As we raise up our fellow employees, and as we "raise adults" at home, we should never lose track of the power that comes when they choose a purpose.

Perhaps THE greatest gifts we can give our children, our "mentees," and our young adults is—not to get them on our program but—to attend to their inner vision. What if we helped them all, as Denise helped these two young women to claim a vision or sense of purpose in their lives? Imagine the power we would unleash to help them in the most fundamental way to lead with their best selves!

Readers Lead

Anonymous wrote: For some reason, I felt more power in the second young lady's mission BEFORE you revealed the context. I thought you

were going to go on to say that leaders have to acknowledge that things are NOT great and that communication and working with others is the key to being a great leader. I think you did point out the power of the second voice.

The problem I see in much of our leadership today is that often leaders feel the need to stay focused on their goal, even when people disagree; [they] stay positive and on *their* message, and they forget the part of two-way communication and working with people. Why don't leaders take the risk of communicating and working with people as an everyday mode of leadership? If the goal is inclusive enough, you are a leader who cannot do anything but listen, and never be content to keep the followers on your message, but on communication and working with others.

I hope that second young lady goes on to lead many using the insights found in her tragedy.

5

Father Leaders

In the last 50 years women have changed the world. After centuries of struggle—struggles that are not over—I agree with Tom Peters who assessed women as leaders in this way, “Women roar. Women rule.” Women ascended to public and business power by employing many tools: debate, dialogue, demonstrations, mentoring, strategizing, and risk-taking. They—with the help of many male allies—liberated themselves from the confines of the house and the confines of strangling gender roles. In an odd asymmetry their forceful revolution quietly liberated men. Our liberation—to lead at home and be freed from our gender chains—came without our employing the tools, strategies, and the constant rich dialogue that characterized the women’s movement.

I write this as Father’s Day approaches, and I am celebrating the chance to be an everyday leader at home. I am eager for the dialogue, debate and mentoring that will help us to shine as much in the home-world as our wives and daughters, nieces and neighbors are doing in the public sphere. I am profoundly grateful that women fought for their space and created ours. Jennifer’s aspirations and career choice opened up an incredible opportunity for me; often a difficult and confusing one, but always a rich opportunity. As men bear the weight of many of the economic cutbacks—especially in manufacturing and construction—I hope that some will walk eagerly back into their homes to be everyday leaders and create a great workplace culture there with their kids. Whether we are the lead parent at home or not, our success and happiness will grow as we (learn to) talk more and better with each other.

In order to spur dialogue you might consider giving a book or CD that will help dad (or a reflective grandpa) to see his nontraditional gifts and develop them fully.

- ☒ My friend Kevin O'Shea has written an insightful book called *The Fatherstyle Advantage: Surefire Techniques Every Parent Can Use to Raise Confident and Caring Kids*.
- ☒ Many newspapers now feature blogs for dads—"dadtalk" seems to be a way to find a bunch. One of the great things about blogs is that you can engage with others there! And since one of the challenges for the primary parent is that it's somewhat isolating, a blog's a nice way to find a virtual community.
- ☒ You can find a solid list of parent books at Amazon. One of the best in that bunch is, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*; it's a thoughtful guide to raising emotionally healthy boys. Also on the list, is *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, a rather frightening but helpful look at what adolescent girls go through.
- ☒ I have ventured into this area by taking leadership principles and transposing them into the world of parenting; you can find my CD with ten lessons to "Be The Parent Your Children WANT To Follow" at www.danmulhern.com.

6

Women, Work And The Arc Of Democratization

Often we live in the middle of slow-moving change, which only appears dramatic when we step way back. It makes you wonder what possibilities go unnoticed, and who seizes on the opportunities buried in those slow but continuous changes. For instance, I have long thought that the entrance of women into the workplace in large numbers—and increasingly into leadership positions—is an example of such long-slow change. Over time, women (and progressive men who have welcomed their arrival) have humanized and democratized workplace culture. Autocratic, top-down, paternalistic leadership—which almost always hurt productivity—was long tolerated as part of business culture. Now, with a more traditionally feminine emphasis on relationships at work—collaboration, encouragement, diversity, etc.—that has changed. It's the humanization and democratization of work that has resulted, for example, in *Fortune's* “100 Best Companies” quadrupling their rates of telecommuting in just one short decade. It's good for the workers, and what's good for the workers often times . . . well, you know.

In the long arc of workplace change, I wonder if we are still slow catching on—catching on to the shortcomings of some old models of leadership. We still seem rapt by the Alpha Males, for whom drives for sex and power irrationally take precedence over the long term welfare of the people they have campaigned to lead. I wonder will males adapt? Can we intentionally evolve? Or will the culture (led by the strong demands of women) simply realize that women are just more reliable—less distracted, contentious, egoistic, and (one of our dirty male secrets) less vindictive?

Say no to the dictator—whether within or without—and push for the humanization and democratization of work, as you lead with your best self.

Readers Lead

Katherine Crowley wrote: Rather than debate the value of one gender over another, I am more interested in the blend. How do we take the best of male leadership and the best of female leadership to address our most crucial issues such as environmental protection, economic recovery and world peace? I'd love to join forces with these goals in mind.