

Bob Gunn, Editor

Be the Change You Wish to See in the World

BY ROBERT W. GUNN

The title of this month's column is pure Gandhi. He lived by this mantra. By adhering to it he led the people of India and brought the British Empire to its knees nonviolently. What may be disquieting in Gandhi's words is the implication that an organization's

transformation is dictated by the leader's willingness to undertake a *personal* makeover. The one leader who *lives* the change she wishes to see will accomplish 1,000 times more than 100 leaders who just talk. Words stop at the head; actions are compelling because they strike at the gut.

A leader pointing to candor must be forthright herself; a leader striving for customer service must tend to the needs of those around him; a leader looking to embody lean principles must eliminate wasteful action in her own life; a leader seeking a global presence must seek out diversity; a leader asking for greater focus must stop multitasking; a leader wishing for integration must embrace collaboration.

I can't help but think of Jack Welch, who led not one, not two, but three major transformations of an institutional icon. He profoundly influenced my life, allowing me to help

reshape GE's staff functions; my advisory firm prospered from the resulting referrals for years.

During his more than 20 years as CEO at General Electric, Welch went from "Neutron Jack" to "Boundaryless Jack" to "Values Jack." His goal was for GE to have the largest market capitalization of any company in the world, which he accomplished in 1996.



This is a man who credits his mother for having shaped his character and igniting his inner flame; a person who goes to church, lives large, and relishes recognition; a leader who said that he "wanted to get under the skin of all 320,000 employees." Filled with vitality, he led passionately. In 1999, *Fortune* magazine described him as the "Manager of the Century."

Then he fell from grace. He misplayed his final act (the Honeywell acquisition), perhaps from hubris. He became a lesson in human frailty—evoking anger, pity, surprise, and scorn in many followers.

Those of us in business aspire to succeed, to win. Those of us in other fields wish to prevail in the good fight, to achieve what is right. We willingly follow leaders who aim toward the stars. That connection helps us endure change, live with uncertainty, work hard, make progress, be recognized, learn, and face the unknown.

But the Welch trajectory isn't new. No matter how promising the beginnings, no matter how much we pin our hopes on someone, so often it seems that our leader disappoints us—undone by ego, quirkiness, or perhaps old-fashioned boredom.

What came easily becomes elusive. Hard-won gains are lost. We become cynical to protect ourselves against dashed hopes.

Disney, Independence Air, the war in Iraq, AT&T, The K Street Project, CitiGroup are some examples. The executives guiding these organizations and endeavors certainly acted to achieve the outcomes they sought for their institutions—becoming near fanatics to the mission, in some cases.

Lest we be too hard on them, please understand that we are merely pointing out the law of cause and effect that pervades all human action, silently, enduringly illuminating the error of our ways. Some call it karma. It provides us feedback so we can correct our aim and chip away at flaws that prevent us from making better choices.

This fosters a different way of looking at leadership. The time-honored logic is that change is achieved by executives who lead followers to a destination they may not otherwise reach. Leaders need willpower in charting their course. Willpower originates from a burning desire, a fierce determination. This resolve originates in intellect, ego, childhood experience, security, power, influence, respect, character, and personality.

Or does willpower come from the heart, from connecting with the experience of life?

The great challenge facing each of us who aspires to lead is to become aware, more fully conscious. As Gandhi said, “Life is one indivisible whole; one cannot do right in one aspect of life while occupied in doing wrong in another.”

Leaders who have the presence of mind to simply “be” know in their hearts that correct action flows naturally from being fully awake. They

see life as an intricate order, a ceaseless dance of energy where cause is effect and effect is cause. We know that insight, wisdom, and a higher state of mind are accessible in those moments when we sense what lies just beyond “reality.” In that heightened state of consciousness, change ceases to be a noun, a thing to be managed. Rather, it becomes an adjective descriptive of the unending flow of life. In small and great actions alike, change expresses the beauty of our souls, the unseen mechanism of how our institutions stay fresh, vibrantly expressing the collective consciousness.

The more we, as leaders, practice the skill of just *being*, the more we liberate human potential. Presence, quiet-mindedness, calmness are feelings I associate with this mental state.

A variety of active choices support such *being*: transcending egotistical desires, putting others first, slowing our mental processes to the speed of life, training our senses and mastering our mental capacities or thought processes, working alongside those who also want to transform their lives, and reading the spiritual masters.

Reflecting deeply, we may discover a heart’s desire that connects us and our institutions to mankind. That connection liberates human energy and helps us focus it on accomplishment that benefits the greater good. An irresistible force begins to emerge.

Do you think this is possible?

The evidence is hiding in plain sight. Can you name the company run on the precept that its first responsibility is to serve the best interests of those who use its products everywhere and has grown profits at 11% annually for 110 years? (Johnson & Johnson) Do you know about the executive who lived by the max-

ims that a leader is the one who bears pain, who abandons himself to the strengths of others, yet grew his company’s stock price 10-fold? (Max dePree) Would you find it remarkable that the dean of a university medical school defines that school’s vision in one word—love—and has gained top-10 status among peers? (Bob D’Alessandri at West Virginia University) Can you imagine a firm where the incoming CEO was told that he lacked the necessary qualifications for the job, promptly sold the core business, and then beat P&G in six of eight categories for 20 straight years? (Darwin Smith, who was quoted in retirement as saying, “I never stopped trying to learn.”)

These names are the tip of the iceberg. There are thousands of leaders who are openly striving to be more human, living in the present, certain in the belief that the results will take care of themselves.

I have the hope that today, right now, at least one of you will make the commitment to being “the change you wish to see in the world.” To look beyond the veil of objective “reality” toward the truth that can only be felt, never perfectly expressed.

I have the hope that we can transform our institutions, our societies, our world in ways that connect us deeply. I have faith that it is happening one person, one leader at a time. I live with the certainty that people will devote themselves to pursuing these truths unconditionally.

And I live in the possibility that our dreams can come true. ■

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