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A Higher Standard of Leadership

This information is derived from the book “A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi” by Keshavan Nair (a management consultant). I thought the book was very good. It may put some people off because of its spiritual or high-moral ground approach. It is very ‘high minded’ and ‘white hat’/‘boy scout’ in style. However, this worked for me and embodied many of the ideas and concepts I have tried to use in my management and leadership approaches. (One thing that I came away from the book with was a general feeling of “I’m not worthy”... ☺ But as the author points out, the key is to try and improve.) I thought that much of the HP Way fit in very closely with the concepts being discussed.

Integrity:

Probably the root concept of the book derives from the idea of integrity - that a person (especially a leader) should have a single standard of conduct in both public and private life. This relates very heavily to a broad/public 'walk the talk' approach to conduct.

Basic steps:

The basic steps that the author (with my paraphrasing) describes are:

- Develop a basis for the single standard
- Commit to the goal
- Develop feedback mechanisms to stay on track
- Avoid forces and situations that get you off track
- Be willing to stand scrutiny

A single standard:

From the point of view of the book, the basis of the standard was to build it on absolute values. In the case of Gandhi, his standard was based around truth and non-violence. From the point of view of generalized leadership approaches the important step is to figure out what are the bed-rock values. Your leadership will be more effective the more fundamental they are. The book talks about pseudo-absolute values (national interest, organizational values, group loyalty, etc.). The leadership issue is that it is much easier to compromise pseudo-absolute values. Another way to say this is that with appropriate absolute values, you never end up having to struggle with an 'ends justify the means' issue.

Commit to the goal:

After you have figured out what the basis or standard is, the idea is to make a personal commitment to that standard. The idea is not to be perfect, but rather to make continuous improvements toward the standard. (This is rather Total Quality Management-ish with the continuous improvement thread...) This is about being conscious of our actions in the context of the standard.

Feedback to stay on track:

In the book, the feedback section is referred to as 'training your conscience'. The key point here is to put some feedback mechanism in place. The general approach proposed is to set aside time for analysis and reflection of your actions against the standard you have set.

Avoid forces that pull you off track:

This is probably the one area where I struggled the most with the book (in terms of general applicability). In the book, the concept is referred to as 'reducing attachments'. This has a very self-denial or monkish sense. I think that how this translates in general application is to prioritize and structure your efforts, activities and surroundings in terms of your standard. For example, if one of your key values is focus - it doesn't make sense to have a cluttered office or schedule.

Be willing to stand scrutiny:

This is really about removing secrecy. Assume that you have selected a good standard with appropriate values. You are doing well with 'walking the talk' and are not violating the values for expediency's sake. If this is true, there should not be much need for secrecy. This really makes leadership efforts much stronger because people can see there are no 'smoke filled rooms'. This one does have some interesting challenges for the business environment because of normal business and competitive (internal and external) pressures. But this is again tied in nicely with the HP-way and a desire to do a good job and give lasting value to long-term HP customers. (Hiding information does not support good long-term relationships.)

Service:

Another key part of the book had to do with leadership in the context of service (about a third of the book). The basic approaches the author describes for service-orientation are:

- Focus on responsibilities
- Emphasize values-based service
- Make a commitment to personal service
- Understand the needs of the people you are serving
- Reconcile power with service

One aspect is that you focus on responsibilities (and not rights). And as a leader, you should only ask others to meet their responsibilities only after you have met yours. This is another area that feels very HP-way-ish. A passage in the book stated:

"In business the highest level of motivation occurs when all employees are driven by a sense of personal responsibility to do their work to the best of their ability. When this occurs, there is less need for supervision and there is more efficiency and greater productivity."

Decisions and Actions

The last section of the book talks about putting this all together and making decisions and actions bounded by your standard and values. The author's approach to this includes:

- Establish and formalize the leadership processes (within the context of your standard)
- Create integrity in the decision process (dealing with speed, integrity and openness).
- Use existing decision making techniques but in the context of the new criteria (derived from your standard).
- Implement your decisions within the constraints of your standard.