



The One Thing You Need to Know

...About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success

by Marcus Buckingham

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Take-Aways

- The one thing great leaders do is to motivate people to believe in a better tomorrow and pursue it.
- Leadership is often mistaken for heroism or success. It is neither.
- Great leaders not only have a vision for change, they feel an urgency to achieve it.
- Great leaders consistently demonstrate two character traits: they have powerful egos and they are unfailingly optimistic that their visions will come to pass.
- Excellent leaders aren't egomaniacs. They will rely on experts for sage advice.
- The leader's mantra is, "I am not satisfied."
- The one talent of great managers is an ability to coach others to be successful, to turn individuals' abilities into performance and productivity for their companies.
- Great managers play chess, not checkers. Each person, like each chess piece, has unique qualities and strengths that must be used.
- It is possible, although not easy, to switch back and forth between the coaching role of the manager and the visionary role of the leader.
- To sustain success, you must discontinue activities you don't enjoy doing.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	9	7	9

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What makes someone a great leader; 2) What makes someone a great manager; and 3) How to sustain your success.

Recommendation

Many soothsayers pontificate sonorously about leadership to anyone who will listen, but over time they gradually lose touch with their subject matter. You may at first wonder if best-selling guru Marcus Buckingham has stumbled into this very ditch after he devotes eight pages early in the book to what makes great marriages (FYI: he says it's always interpreting everything your spouse does in the warmest possible light, whether or not that is logical). Well, not to worry – Buckingham is just warming up. An original thinker who lets his intellect roam, he brings sharp insights to the evergreen topic of leadership. Although this book is essentially creative in nature rather than intellectually rigorous, you'll come to respect the powerful perceptions it has to offer. Buckingham must navigate a perilous balance between clarity and oversimplification, and he pulls it off rather well. While *getAbstract.com* wouldn't say this is the only book you need to read to understand leadership, we highly recommend it.

Abstract

Dialogue: Just This One Thing

In the movie *City Slickers*, two characters played by Billy Crystal and Jack Palance debate the meaning of life as they ride horses on a dude ranch. The rawhide-faced, gravel-voiced Palance turns to Crystal and says, "I'll tell you the secret to life. This one thing. Just this one thing. You stick to that..."

"What's the one thing?" Crystal asks.

"That's what you've got to figure out," Palance answers.

Corporate leaders sense there is just one thing that they need to know about leadership; they just don't know what it is. To understand what makes a great leader, it is useful to understand first what makes a great manager.

The One Thing Great Managers Know

Behind every great employee stands a great manager. Great managers think first about what they can do to help their colleagues achieve success. They instinctively understand that they serve their companies best by helping the employees who report to them. The manager's job, they reason, is to make others more productive. Great managers can be tough and have very high expectations, yet they convince others that they passionately desire their success. Good managers say they are motivated by, "Watching other people grow." This focus is the one quality that great managers must have: a talent for turning employees' skills into productivity and performance. If the one talent of great managers is an ability to coach others to be successful, what is the one talent of great leaders?

"What do leaders get done that is distinct from what ordinary people of initiative, creativity, resolve and integrity get done?"

"From all my research, this is the only satisfactory definition I've found: Great leaders rally people to a better future."

“Success comes most readily to those who reject balance, who instead pursue strategies that are intentionally imbalanced.”

“If the core talent of great managers is an instinct to coach others toward success, then optimism and ego are the talents underpinning all great leadership.”

“The need for a talent for optimism is almost self-evident. As a leader you must believe, deeply, instinctively, that things can get better.”

“Whenever a person strives to make others see a better future, there is leadership.”

What Is Leadership?

Leadership is often confused with heroic success. To illustrate this, remember what happened on July 24, 2002, at a Pennsylvania coal mine named Quecreek. A giant machine was digging through a coal seam when it struck an underground lake. Tons of water shot through the shaft, tossing a 60-ton mining machine aside like a toy. The men inside the mine dove out of the way, regrouped and realized three things. First, their exit was blocked. Second, they needed to move to the highest available ground to escape the rising water. And third, one man was about to die. Mark “Moe” Popernack, who had been operating the mining machine, had escaped the torrent by jumping to the right when everyone else jumped to the left.

Now they could see him on the other side of the waterspout, alive but surrounded by water. Moe was cut off. The others realized that as the water rose, he would be doomed. Crew boss Randy Fogle decided to save Moe. The water was still barreling into the tunnel, and Fogle knew he had to act. He had an idea: he could drive a front-end loader to the edge of the torrent that divided Moe from the others, and then lower the bucket. If Fogle could get close enough, Moe could leap into the bucket. Then, Fogle could retreat to safety. The notion was sound in theory, but if the torrent caught the front-end loader, it would tumble it down the shaft and take Fogle with it. Fogle got in, started the big machine and edged it as far forward as he dared. Then he stretched out the bucket. “Far enough?” he yelled to Moe.

Moe shook his head. No, the bucket wasn’t close enough for him to jump. The crew boss realized that he would have to edge closer to the perilous, roaring spout of water if he hoped to save Moe. “I thought, ‘Oh, boy, this is getting pretty touchy here,’” Fogle later recalled. “So I wiggled around a couple more feet and I yelled, ‘You make it now?’”

Moe gathered himself and took a head-first leap for his life as the waters closed in. “I felt that hard steel,” he recalled later, “and slid right into the back of the bucket, and just stayed there until Randy got me across where they all were.” Thanks to other resourceful actions by Fogle and by rescuers on the scene, the men lived to tell their harrowing tale. It was a close brush with death.

The miners were barely out of the shaft when they agreed to hire a lawyer and sue the mining company. Fogle refused. The disaster was hardly predictable, he said, and a state safety team had certified the mine as okay just a few weeks earlier. So why sue their employer?

Did Fogle demonstrate the one thing you need to know about leadership? Most organizations would answer, yes. The answer, surprisingly, is no. Fogle was brave, innovative, original, selfless and honorable. He showed four characteristics most organizations define as leadership: “initiative, creativity, the courage of one’s convictions and integrity.” These are leadership traits, but every fine person should have these traits, not just leaders. His qualities did not reflect the one thing you need to know about leadership. So, “what do leaders get done that is different from what ordinary people of initiative, creativity, resolve and integrity get done?”

The only one, satisfactory definition of leadership is, “Great leaders rally people to a better future.” This is not to say Fogle and the rescuers weren’t leaders, he was and they were. But their behavior did not reflect the one thing you need to know about leadership. Leaders hold in their minds a unique, clear image of how the future could be different. Whether it’s Martin Luther King, Gandhi or John F. Kennedy, the great leader sees a

"Leaders are fascinated by the future. You are a leader if, and only if, you are restless for change..."

"He is a leader if, and only if, he is able to rally others to the better future he sees."

"The key thing about leading is not only that you envision a better future, but also that you believe, in every fiber of your being, that you are the one to make this future come true."

"From all my interviews with effective leaders, I cannot think of one example in which the person lacked this craving to be at the helm, charting the course ahead."

crystal clear picture of how the future could be better. This clarity of vision, plus an ability to sell it to others, enables leaders to overcome obstacles. Corollaries of the one thing you need to know about leadership are:

- Leaders not only see a need for change, they feel a restless urgency to bring it about.
- You can be a leader in any role if you inspire others toward a brighter tomorrow.
- The core talents of a great leader are an optimistic outlook and a strong ego.
- "I am not satisfied" is the leader's mantra.

Sunny Disposition

Blues chanteuse Billie Holliday used to sing about walking "on the sunny side of the street." Great leaders habitually exhibit a strong optimism. The leader isn't putting on a bright face or trying to appear brave despite obstacles. Rather, the instinctual leader genuinely sees a path to improved circumstances, and sincerely believes brighter days are coming. This is the "I have no choice" breed of optimism. It is the voice of Winston Churchill, who even as Britain became isolated from Nazi-occupied Europe, declared, "I take up my task in buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men." This optimism is not blithe. Churchill and Abraham Lincoln, for example, struggled with depression. Their type of optimism, however, saw a brighter future even in the face of discouragement. "Properly defined, the opposite of a leader isn't a follower. The opposite of a leader is a pessimist."

Ego and Integrity

You might conclude that pride preceded the fall of Bernie Ebbers and Ken Lay. In reality, however, their problem was a dearth of integrity rather than a surfeit of pride. Successful leaders crave their positions at the helm, for they see themselves as the best captains of their ships. In this regard, it helps to understand what outstanding leaders are not:

- Outstanding leaders are not humble – Their aspirations aren't meek, and neither is their belief in their own capabilities.
- Outstanding leaders don't assume they have all the answers – They have strong egos, but they also call on expert advice when that is the best course to follow.
- Outstanding leaders are not rude or insensitive – Being a leader does not require being brash or abrasive; indeed, many fine leaders are rather reserved.
- Outstanding leaders are not egomaniacs – Having a strong ego is different from thinking the universe follows an orbital path around your existence. True leaders apply their egos to the accomplishment of objectives that transcend themselves.

Being able to grasp the one thing you need to know about leadership doesn't mean you can ignore everything else. For example, although the leader's visionary qualities differ from the manager's coaching instincts, you can switch back and forth between those roles if needed. To do that, you should understand these principles of being a great manager:

- Hire the right people in the first place – Being a great coach to a lousy team of players will limit your accomplishments.
- Clearly define what you expect others to do – Productive employees are not confused about what they're supposed to be achieving.
- Understand the strengths of your employees – Play chess, not checkers. In chess, the pieces don't all move the same way. Good managers study each person's strengths and put other pieces in position to make the right moves. Use each person's uniqueness.

“Leaders don’t set humble goals. They don’t have humble dreams. They are not humble in their assessment of their own abilities. Virtually nothing about them is humble.”

“Over time, my positive illusions create an upward spiral of love. My illusions give me conviction. My conviction leads to security. My security fosters intimacy. And my intimacy reinforces love...the One Thing you need to know about happy marriage: Find the most generous explanation for each other’s behavior and believe it.”

- Impress others with the challenges ahead – As you outline the scope of your employees’ future challenges, instill confidence that they can overcome them.
- Find the triggers – Understand what motivates and discourages your key players. Learn how people learn and what triggers improved performance.

While managers search for employees’ individuality, leaders search for universal appeal, for the factors people have in common rather than their differences. They use those commonalities to realize a future vision. Leaders apply the saying, “Know someone’s fear and you’ll know their need.” Collectively people share five universal pairs “of fears and needs:”

1. The fear of death, for yourself or your family – And the need for safety.
2. The fear of strangers – And the need for a common bond with other people.
3. The fear of an uncertain future – And a matching need for a clear direction.
4. The fear of utter disorder – Or what could be termed a need for solid order.
5. The fear of unimportance – Which translates into a need for respect.

Additional Thoughts for Great Leaders

Leaders are able to develop a clear vision of the future, because:

- Leaders choose their role models carefully.
- Leaders work hard, and practice to become better at what they do.
- Leaders strive to understand their organizations’ core strengths.
- Leaders establish their organizations’ “core score,” the way success is measured.
- Leaders take time to reflect on current circumstances, and on alternate possibilities.
- Leaders continually pose the question, “What actions can we take today?”
- Leaders focus on action. Only action contributes to realizing their future vision.

Holding onto Success

Finally, to sustain your success, master another “one thing:” discover what you hate doing, and stop doing it. This may sound counterintuitive, because the common advice is to shore up your weaknesses. Carefully consider, however, that sustained success requires making a substantial impact over an extended time. Focusing on your shortcomings will not enhance the energy you need to run the marathon of an entire career. Indeed, it will do the opposite. If you’re unhappy in some aspect of your work, act. Address the situation. Quit or adjust your role, find better partners or discover some aspect of your job that will make you stronger over time. This will put you closer to being great at what you do. Once you understand the one thing you need to know to be a great manager, the one thing you need to know to be a great leader and the one thing you need to know to sustain your success, you “can see what the best of you, now focused and unfettered, can achieve.”

About The Author

A 1987 graduate of Cambridge University, Marcus Buckingham spent 17 years with the Gallup Organization leading research into the characteristics of the world’s best leaders, managers and workplaces. He is an authority on employee productivity and leadership. His work led to two books: *First, Break All the Rules: What the World’s Best Managers Do Differently* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. Buckingham is an independent consultant, author and speaker.