

Practicing Leadership: Mastering the Basic Moves

Robert J. Thomas

Imagine the following position advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal*:

Wanted: Individual with the skills to be a coach, teacher, cheerleader, hero, visionary, steward, designer, artist, conductor, figurehead, and/or sensitive, caring human being, as circumstances (financial and interpersonal) demand. Must have demonstrated mastery of the Seven Habits and the Five Disciplines, as well as proficiency in achieving culture change. Intense personal commitment to our mission and our people is essential; however, candidate must also be able to stand apart in order to give (and receive) an objective accounting of reality.

No wonder we hear so often about the shortage of leadership in business!

I recently spent five years exploring the nature of effective leadership, not theoretically but through intense, hands-on collaboration among a group of industry executives, faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and graduate students, most of whom had several years of work experience. Together we identified the key skills of leadership and created a process for learning them. That process, which rests on the premise that practice must be intimately connected to the day-to-day experience of leadership, has subsequently been validated in Arthur D. Little's work with executives in the automobile, electronics, and metals industries.

It turns out that effective leaders know and use a remarkably small set of fundamental skills. In fact, these skills are so fundamental that they may be more appropriately referred to as *moves* – as in dance moves or chess moves. These skills are not complete in themselves; they become effective only through adroit combination.

The notion of „moves“ makes it possible to take leadership out of the realm of the mystical (or the genetic) and see it as analogous to many other complex activities. Take magic, for example. Most complicated magical effects are little more than the artful combination of a finite number of basic moves (e.g., misdirection, feint, and switch). A magical effect or trick may capture the audience's attention and elicit a certain amount of awe, but the effect is really just a combination of moves. Similarly, golf, tennis, chess, and ballet build on a handful of basic moves. In this article, we first identify the key moves and then suggest ways to put them into practice.

The Five Basic Leadership Moves

We have identified five basic leadership moves: seeing, self-monitoring, working with values, trusting, and challenging.

Seeing. Effective leaders are highly *perceptive*. They see – and hear – things others don't see – possibilities as well as realities. They see the unseen because they don't limit themselves to a single perspective. They see from their own perspective, but they also seek to understand the perspectives of others, e.g., of those whom they hope to lead.

For example, Max De Pree, former CEO and Board Chairman of Herman Miller, Inc., a perennial on *Fortune's* list of most admired companies, extolled the importance of seeing when he argued that „leaders need an ability to look through a variety of lenses... including the lens of a follower.“ De Pree demonstrated this both in his practice of inviting employees to participate in creating a corporate vision rather than imposing one from above and in his masterful use of metaphor to convert readers into believers (e.g., Leadership as Art).

Heightened perception derives in large measure from an awareness of the sources of bias and distortion that color what they and others see. In other words, leaders understand how values influence perception (their own as well as others'). Seeing, as a basic leadership move, is an essential component in active or empathic listening, in the ability to take on the role of the „other,“ and in identifying what Peter Senge has most recently referred to as „mental models“ or the ability to distinguish *what is* from *what we desire*. Seeing is also basic to being able to recognize the „unwritten rules of the game“ and, therefore, to overcoming the hidden barriers to effective change.

Self-Monitoring. Leaders assume, negotiate, or have thrust upon them many different roles. In order to assess those situations and to have the widest possible array of options at hand, effective leaders are both „insiders“ (sincere, committed participants) and „outsiders“ (capable of stepping outside a situation or a role to assess the range of possible actions available). In other words, effective leaders learn to monitor themselves in action and to review, critique, and amend their behavior in real time. As one senior executive put it simply:

„Someone once told me that I had a tremendous effect on people just by the way I talked. So I started consciously stepping back and trying to see myself as others saw me. It was pretty sobering. I was a real bear at times... and a bore at others. By paying attention to myself I began to have a better understanding of the consequences of my behavior. The more I practiced, the easier and more unconscious it became. Now I just

routinely find myself looking over my own shoulder to check on how I'm behaving and what effect I'm having.“
With practice, self-awareness becomes less mechanical and more natural.

Working with Values. Since they strive to understand the role values play in perception (their own and others'), effective leaders are comfortable with values. They understand and enact their own values, help others articulate what they value, handle value conflicts straightforwardly, and make value-based decisions. They recognize that an organization's values provide stability and direction; therefore, they don't shy away from conversations about values or limit awareness of values to the drafting of value statements. A highly successful CEO of a specialty chemicals firm observed:

„Once I took on this job, I realized that values were the glue that held this company together. We have lots of ways to generate and evaluate facts, but in the end we have to worry as much about doing the proper thing as about doing the right thing. Those aren't always the same, and part of my job is being able to tell the difference between the two.“

Nothing in his education as an engineer or in his prior career as a technical specialist had really prepared this CEO to work with values. In fact, he credited much of his prior success to managing on the basis of facts. But once his leadership task became one of enterprise-wide *integration*, rather than technical improvement, he found that the ability to work with values *became critical*.

Perhaps surprisingly, the ability to work with values is not something we routinely associate with leadership. We may expect leaders to *have* values, but we generally don't expect them to be skillful at working with values. Yet, it's hard to imagine leadership without real, operational values.

Trusting. Effective leaders know how to trust and how to be trusted. Moreover, as Robert Levering has demonstrated in his research on *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*, effective leaders create a climate of trust that permeates the entire company. But trust is not just an atmosphere or a warm feeling, it makes many other things possible. For example, a senior manufacturing executive trained in the tools of TQM and an ardent advocate of fact-based management – made it very clear that faithful and accurate reporting of facts was impossible without high levels of trust:

„For the first time, people find that they have no choice but to trust the numbers they are given. In the past, they'd ignore someone else's numbers because they didn't or couldn't or wouldn't trust them. Fact-based management works only if you trust the facts someone else has given you.“

Ray Stata and Alex D'Arbeloff, CEOs of Analog Devices and Teradyne respectively, have seconded this conclusion by coupling TQM tools with „productive conversation,“ i.e., concerted efforts to build trust among managers so they can better and more effectively share knowledge.

In other words, trust is not just a word laminated in plastic. It is both an activity and an outcome – a precondition and a result. And trusting is deeply ingrained in the practice of leadership.

Challenging. Effective leaders pursue the creation of goals and objectives as part of a dialogue, a collaborative process through which possibilities are revealed rather than imposed. They continually question norms and assumptions in an effort to remove unnecessary and unreal limits on the people and organizations they lead. However, challenge need not take the form of confrontation or theatrical oratory. Indeed, highly effective leaders often elicit new ideas from the people they lead, rather than invent them. But whether they challenge by provocation or evocation, effective leaders find ways to invite people out of the circumstances and mindsets that constrain them. Reflecting on the attributes of the leader he most admired, a former Fortune 50 CEO recalled that „he rarely raised his voice or pounded the desk. He would lead by asking questions. He often did not know the answers. But by asking he invited us to help him find them.“

Practicing While Performing

Understanding leadership in terms of a finite number of underlying moves makes it something that one can learn and improve *through practice*. Not everyone has the dexterity, the drive, or the desire to be a great golfer – or a great leader. Clearly a certain amount of each quality is essential to mastering the underlying moves. But far more important is dedicated practice of *the underlying moves*.

Whereas practice and performance may be formally separated in time, conceptually the two are intertwined: performance is a form of practice (with an audience watching) and practice is a form of performance (without the audience). And since most leaders see themselves as engaged in continuous performance, it's generally not possible to schedule practice „after hours.“ *Practice, therefore, has to be woven into performance.*

Most of us know how to perform while practicing – we sing to imaginary (and adoring) audiences in the shower, invent crowds who clap in awe at our drives off a practice tee, and deliver stirring speeches in the privacy of a closed office. But how do you practice in the midst of performance?

The key to practicing in the midst of performance is to identify where opportunities exist – or can be created – in the context of everyday performance and make them your practice field. Make yourself acutely aware of situations where you can practice seeing, self-monitoring, working with values, trusting, and/or challenging. I offer some examples below, but these are only a small fraction of the ways that men and women I have worked with have found to practice their leadership moves. What's critical in each case is that you practice and that you are mindful of what you are doing and/or seeing as you do it.

Seeing. Go to a meeting (best if it's not one you're chairing) and observe how people behave in meetings. Take notes if you like or, once you're away from the meeting, write down all you can remember. Don't limit yourself to the traditional minutes of the meeting; try to re-create the words, gestures, ambiance, intimations, body language, and history that enable you to understand what was „going on.“ The goal here is not to remember everything, but to gain insight into *what you remember and why*.

Self-Monitoring. Ask someone you know reasonably well to videotape you as you engage in social interaction, e.g., in a meeting, where it's possible to see you as others see you and to observe the impact of your behavior. Firmly instruct them that you want them to picture you as others see you: no staging or props. Resist the temptation to stop and restart in order to get the best image. Just keep the camera going for 20 minutes or so. Rewind the tape and watch yourself in action. What do you see that surprises you? What do you see that you like or dislike and why? Practice „watching yourself over your own shoulder.“

Working with Values. With a friend or colleague, strike up a conversation about passion. Talk about something you are passionate about and encourage your companion to do the same. Listen to what the person says and, more importantly, listen to *how* he or she says it. What happens when people talk about something they feel passionate about? Then, in other situations, look for signs of passion – indications that someone cares deeply about something. Alternatively, make a list of the things you value. Then ponder how you express the importance of these things in your daily life.

Trusting. At the end of the day, stop for a moment and think about all the agreements, commitments, obligations, and promises you made that day. The first time you do this, list them on a piece of paper. The list should include not only the items that might be on your „to do“ list, but also the more subtle agreements that you enter into. For example, when someone buys you lunch or just a cup of coffee, is there an implicit obligation incurred? How many commitments do you make in a given day? How many do you plan to keep? What is the cost of not fulfilling them?

Challenging. Practice finding solutions in unlikely places. Ponder this simple idea: „No matter how difficult or vexing a problem you may be facing, someone somewhere has already devised a solution to a similar problem. Your job is to find that someone.“ Step back and consider some of the general features of a problem you are trying to solve. What is it like if you look at it from a distance? From that distance, look around to see what other kinds of people or organizations may have the same problem. How might they have already solved it? Use this approach with the group you lead – or with your peers – to tackle a problem you find vexing. For example, scientists and engineers in the R&D department of a firm with which I was working recently complained that they faced real difficulty getting plant managers interested in new production technologies. They would make presentations and write technological reports, but they couldn't generate much enthusiasm. I encouraged the manager of the R&D department to explore with his staff what the problem looked like from a distance. Who else might have faced a similar problem and how did they solve it? In a lively discussion – in which old assumptions were set aside momentarily – the management team compared itself to a winery staffed by specialists who had a great product but little marketing experience or budget. The winery, it mused, could attract customers by hosting wine tastings, a way to get customers to sample their wares and learn more about the people and the process behind the product. In short order, the R&D department began to organize a technology fair, complete with hands-on exhibits and take-home samples for their „customers.“ The fair was a great success, and interest in new technologies surged.

Practicing as a Leadership Team

How can a leadership team practice the basic moves? This question arises more and more as organizations seek to work and lead in teams. In a recent assignment with a senior management team, we addressed the issue by using real, focused business issues as the context for practice. For example, the top management team in a highly profitable equipment manufacturer admitted to having difficulty resolving problems that cross-cut functional domains. When such problems occurred, the group would sweep them under the rug, find a scapegoat, or dissolve into disagreement. But they also recognized that cross-functional problems were likely to increase in number and that they, as leaders, had to demonstrate workable methods for resolving them.

Together with the top divisional executive, we targeted a particularly complex problem (costly production disruptions resulting from breakdowns in a key supplier) as a practice field. We used that problem to practice several of the basic moves, particularly seeing (What counts as data in this situation? How does the source of the

information affect our willingness to believe the information?); self-monitoring (by periodically intervening in the discussion, we were able to draw attention to how the media – words, images, and body language – were affecting the message); and challenging (pushing back the boundaries of comparison to find situations where similar problems had been encountered and solved). The key was to establish a productive conversation in which there was a clear effort to balance inquiry (information-seeking) with advocacy (opinion-giving).

In this instance, there were three important outcomes: a solution to the problem they had been grappling with; practice (and progress) in basic skills that would enable the team to lead more effectively; and the experience of a „successful practice,“ which gave team members the desire to look for more opportunities to practice. Performance and practice had been reunited.

Conclusion

The „proof“ of effective leadership ultimately rests in the production of results (e.g., obstacles overcome, records set). But it’s important to recognize that we are not likely to learn all we need to know about overcoming obstacles or setting records by focusing only on the *moment* of victory. We must learn to appreciate the various elements of *practice* that lead up to, enable, or increase the odds of success. These elements – which I have referred to here as leadership moves – are usually not visible in the moment of success. And, unless we are disciplined, we are extremely unlikely to look for those elements – or their absence – in the aftermath of failure.

The leadership moves outlined here are exercises that can improve an individual’s performance as a leader. With practice, they can help turn leadership into a way of life.

Robert J. Thomas is an Associate Director in Arthur D. Little’s Operations Management Practice and leader of its Organization Practice mission. Previously a member of the faculties of the University of Michigan and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he helps clients manage organizational and technological change. He is also the author of an award-winning 1995 book, What Machines Can’t Do: Politics and Technology in the Industrial Enterprise, University of California Press, Berkeley.