Integrity, Courage, Empathy (ICE): Three Leadership Essentials

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In this first-person account, a senior pharmaceutical executive presents his beliefs about three leadership essentials: integrity, courage, and empathy (ICE). In the sidebar, a consulting psychologist describes the confluence between ICE and emotional intelligence. Taken together, ICE and emotional intelligence underscore the critical behavioral dimension of leadership. Successful leaders need to stay as focused on how they are leading as they are on what they are trying to achieve.

Late at night, as though it was yesterday, I remember a kitchen table conversation I had with my Father more than 20 years ago. I had just accepted a promotion to our headquarters and was now taking the leap from sales to sales management. My Dad, who had been an effective professional throughout his career, said something that evening that has stayed with me forever. In his simple yet effective plain-speaking style, he said, “Always, always remember that people don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

For 20+ years, I have had the terrific experience of working for a world-class global pharmaceutical company, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK). During this time, I have experienced the full spectrum of leadership styles, ranging from noticeably excellent to surprisingly ineffective. I have also had the privilege to lead hundreds of people in the different positions I have held in this company. Based on these experiences, I believe the major difference between good leadership and ineffective leadership is that the former is grounded in solid core values whereas the latter is deficient of those same core values. It is the difference between substance and style; the higher up one progresses in an organization, the more important it is for that leader to possess an emotional intelligence that allows those values to emerge and augment one’s core leadership competencies.

A few years ago, I formulated a simple leadership model called “ICE,” which I have encoded into my own leadership software. It is a blueprint, a recipe for leadership, that has come from years of on-the-job training, countless interactions with friends and mentors, experiences that have led to many successes and just as many learning opportunities—which others may call failures—as well as what my father taught me about leadership. Just as ice is the crystallization of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, my “ICE” is the crystallization of three leadership essentials: integrity, courage, and empathy.

The first of the essentials is integrity. Simply defined, it is the ability to tell the truth. It is not about putting “spin” on a situation or rationalizing an issue to justify one’s behavior. It is about facing up to and telling the truth, regardless of the nature of the news—good or bad. Unfortunately, I have seen too many individuals in positions of leadership who are terrific at telling the truth when the news is good. They are the first ones to show up at your office to tell you that you won an award or that you did a great job or that they got you that promotion you wanted so badly. Yet they struggle with bad news, the constructive criticism that people need so badly in order to become more effective in their careers. These same “glad handers” often procrastinate when it comes to addressing issues that are delicate or distasteful. They just cannot handle the task of facing individuals and telling them what they absolutely need to be told because the truth in these situations is difficult. They simply do not understand that bad news is not like red wine: It doesn’t get better with age—it sours.

Integrity for leaders is more than the obvious. It is more than simply telling the truth. If you peel the onion one more layer, there is another integrity test that is just as critical: the honesty to place a team’s agenda before one’s own. For leaders with integrity, the needs and activities of the people they lead must transcend their own needs. Further, leaders with integrity stay focused on the needs of an organization as a whole, and they model organizational stewardship. Leaders with integrity inspire teams to performance measures and professional rewards well beyond expectations. As President John Kennedy said, “In a high tide, all the ships rise.”

The second essential in the “ICE” model is courage. Courage, the desired attribute “always remember that people don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

that the Cowardly Lion in The Wizard of Oz wanted so badly, is the ability to demonstrate intestinal fortitude in challenging situations. As Harry Truman said after he tragically ended World War II with the atomic destruction of two Japanese cities and the loss of millions of lives, “I get paid to make the tough decisions, the 51-49% decisions.” Courage in leadership is also about having sufficient confidence in yourself—and in your team so you give them the latitude and autonomy to perform well. All people need from leaders is the guidance, direction, and support to do their jobs effectively. Finally, courage is about supporting the decisions and actions that teams make by allowing them to reap the rewards when their decisions are correct, and by leaders’ shouldering the responsibility when things do not go as expected. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard leaders say something like this, “Okay, you can go ahead with that decision but I am not sure that I support it.” What kind of leadership is that? I call it “teflon leadership” and, unlike the Truman model, it is risk-averse and designed so nothing sticks to such leaders.
ICE and Emotional Intelligence

In Steve Stefano’s articulation of ICE (integrity, courage, empathy), we see the confluence of leadership practice and theory; specifically, how a Fortune 100 executive actually leads, and how that leadership is emblematic of emotional intelligence. Defined as the awareness of one’s own and others’ emotions and the ability to use that emotional awareness to achieve results, emotional intelligence has been established as a master leadership competency by a mounting body of research.

Stefano’s formulation of ICE parallels the core emotional competencies identified by a number of researchers including Boyatzis (1999), Goleman (2000), Cherniss & Goleman (2001), and Goleman (2002). Over 20 years ago, research on key leadership factors established that to a significant degree what distinguished outstanding managers from the rest was emotional intelligence (Boyatzis, 1982). A study involving 121 business organizations worldwide concluded that 67 percent of the abilities essential for effective performance were emotional competencies (Rosier, 1994). Chen and Jacobs (1997) found that emotional intelligence was twice as important in contributing to excellence when compared to pure intelligence and technical expertise.

Clearly, all of this research illuminates the how of leadership; that is, the behavioral dimension of essential leadership acts that include articulating a vision, inspiring others, achieving alignment, ensuring execution, and accelerating the development of others, as well as delivering results. After decades of valuing the rational what business leaders do—to the near exclusion of how they do it—this research underscores the critical need to integrate the two. We can think of this integration of the what or left-brain functioning (logic, analysis, linear thought) with the how or right-brain functioning (concepts, relationships, lateral thought) as total brain leadership. Through this total brain functioning, leaders will sustain their efforts to compete fiercely, blaze new ground, mentor the best and brightest, and make work meaningful, as well as deliver shareholder value.

Stefano, mentored by a father who “got” this essential integration of the what and the how, captures the essence of emotional intelligence in his ICE model of leadership. Consider the consistency between the three components of ICE—integrity, courage and empathy—and the four competencies of emotional intelligence for which this author (Wasylshyn, 2003) uses the acronym SO SMART: self-observation, self-management, attunement to others, and relationship traction.

When Stefano talks about integrity, he echoes the trustworthiness and integrity components of self-management. When he emphasizes the critical component of courage in leadership, he hits on the central component of self-observation. And when he underscores the importance of empathy, he is in total coherence with the SO SMART competency of attunement to others. Finally, ICE, in its totality, is in sync with the SO SMART competency of relationship traction: establishing relationships that are real, authentic, visceral, and not merely a transactional, what-have-you-done-for-me-lately orientation to others.

In over 20 years of coaching leaders, I have found that how they lead has been their major development gap. Using emotional intelligence as a learning tool has been the way to close that gap (Wasylshyn, 2003; Wasylshyn, et al., 2004). This is a tough developmental agenda given the defensive reasoning that characterizes many smart business people (Argyris, 1991). The leaders who have been able to transcend old beliefs about the need to suppress their emotional selves and who decide instead to discover and practice their brand of emotional intelligence experience breakthrough learning and sustained behavior change. Those who are not willing to evolve behaviorally lock themselves into career plateaus, or often de-rail.

ICE (integrity, courage, and empathy): In the words of Stefano’s father, “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” SO SMART (self-observation, self-management, attunement to others, and relationship traction): In my words, and in the spirit of total brain leadership, “Reason without emotion is bland, and emotion without reason is blind.”

In 2001, I was given the opportunity to lead a cross-functional team on an important GSK project. Our mission was to design a program that would provide Medicare-eligible people with an immediate and significant discount on all GSK medicines regardless of where they had their prescriptions dispensed. Within three short months, we met our challenge. We introduced a novel program called the GSK Orange Card. It was a significant success and ultimately helped catalyze the passage of today’s federally funded drug benefit for the Medicare population. Two things enabled GSK to introduce the Orange Card successfully. First, we assembled and empowered a cross-functional team to take action and make decisions. Second, we supported their decisions and recommendations once they were fully discussed and finalized. This team was effective because we demonstrated the type of courage that allowed them to feel empowered to act and inspired to complete their mission.

The final essential in the ICE model is empathy, the special ingredient that distinguishes truly great leaders from everyone else. Empathy is the “secret sauce” that enables them to balance meeting their own goals and objectives with a genuine regard for the people whom they lead. Make no mistake about it, successful, empathetic leaders are not soft on performance. They are usually hard-core, goal-driven leaders, but they also possess the ability to temper that drive with an understanding of their people’s wants, needs, and desires. At the end of the day, they ultimately get what they want without “road kill” along the way.

Personally, I learned this lesson the hard way. In January 1985, I had just been promoted to the home office of Glaxo. As an associate training manager, my job was to train all newly hired sales representatives on Zantac, which at the time was our new blockbuster medicine for ulcers. As a young, enthusiastic professional, I was full of energy, ambition, and enthusiasm, and I was also pretty full of myself.

A new sales class of approximately 40 representatives was in town, and I would be training them for the next two weeks. The Sunday night preceding the start of the training class, I completed all my preparation and then retired for the evening. During the night, there was a tremendous North Carolina ice
storm, which resulted in the loss of electricity and heat to our house, as well as to many other homes in the area.

When I awoke on Monday morning, I was faced with a decision: leave my wife and infant daughter to fend for themselves or stay home and miss my first training class. I made what I thought was the noble and empathic decision: I lit the fireplace, found some blankets for my family, and off to the class I went.

So there I was in front of 40 new sales reps teaching my heart out. Suddenly, I saw the door at the back of the room open and in walked our head of sales, Jim Butler. At that time, Jim was an icon in the company. Everyone, and I mean everyone, loved him, especially the sales force—yet I could not quite figure out why. No single thing immediately popped out when you first met him, no obvious trait that signaled a great leader. Yet everyone admired him and would run through walls for him. I kept thinking, “What is it that makes this guy so great?”

Well, I found out on that day when Jim unexpectedly walked into my sales class. He motioned me to the back of the room. I excused myself from the class, and, as I walked toward Jim, I remember thinking that he was going to congratulate me for braving the elements to get to the training program. Instead, he politely chastised me for leaving my wife and daughter without any heat and electricity. More importantly, he told me that he had driven to my house to pick them up and had taken them to his house until heat and electricity were restored to our home. This was the head of sales—the top guy!

When I completed the day’s training session, I drove to Jim’s house. When I arrived, I found that, in addition to my family, two other Glaxo families were camping out there too.

I worked for Jim for 10 years. He was as tough as nails when it came to performance. He was smart, goal-oriented, strategic—and he certainly demanded performance. So did many of his peers, but people responded to Jim differently. His secret, the reason why people would run through walls for him, was that in addition to core business skills, he really cared for the people he led. He modeled what my Dad said to me many years earlier, “Always, always remember that people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Steve Stefano is a senior vice president at GlaxoSmithKline, a research pharmaceutical company that currently ranks second in the US pharmaceutical industry. He is a member of the company’s Operating Committee, which develops policies and strategies for its US business. Mr. Stefano is also a guest lecturer at the Wharton School’s Windover Executive Management Program and at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business. Currently he is a motivational speaker on such leadership topics as “ICE” and “Passion in the Workforce.”

Karol M. Wasylyshyn is president of Leadership Development Forum, a management consulting firm specializing in applications of psychology in business. She is a past member of the coaching faculty in the Wharton School’s Advance Management Program, an adjunct professor of clinical psychology at Widener University, and founder of Widener’s Center for Applied Emotional Intelligence. Since 1982, Wasylyshyn has profiled and coached hundreds of executives in every global sector.
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