

**Excellence. NO EXCUSES!**

**Excerpt:**

**LEADING:  
PEOPLE  
FIRST  
(REALLY!)  
(PLEASE!)**

**Tom Peters**

**29 May 2014**

# Leadership2014: Job #1

“Employee development” is decidedly **NOT** an HR term; it is a reason for being, along with service to one’s customers:

*Your principal moral obligation as a leader is to develop the skillset, “soft” and “hard,” of every one of the people in your charge (temporary as well as semi-permanent) to the maximum extent of your abilities. The good news: This is also the #1 mid- to long-term ... profit maximization strategy!*

## Developing People: The Memories That Matter

*“I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment; it takes place every day.”—Albert Camus*

*In a month, as I write, I’ll be 68. No matter how hard one tries to be forward focused, at that age there is a frequent urge to “sum things up.” As one does look back, there is a certain class of memories that stand out. I know my own story—and I’ve talked to many others. When you look back at “what really matters”—it’s rarely “the numbers.” Make no mistake, as you soldier on your tiny or huge enterprise must be profitable to survive. Wanna do great things? Well, check the “cash flow” statement first. True, but still “the summing up statement” is far more about the basics of human behavior and character than about the angle of incline of a market share graph. What follows is, then, in a fashion, “the memories that matter”—or will matter. Why point this out? Because to get the tally right on this one at age 68, the sorts of things enumerated here must have been “top of mind” throughout your career—i.e., today, tomorrow, this week, this month, this year.*

The “memories that matter”/that *will* matter:

**The people you developed who went on to stellar accomplishments inside or outside the company. (A reputation as “a peerless people developer.”)**

**The (no more than) two or three people you developed who went on to *create* stellar institutions of their own.**

**The longshots (people with “a certain something”) you bet on who surprised themselves—and your peers.**

\*\*\*\*\*

## Selection of General Officers in the Indian (or Any Other) Army

It occurred during a seminar in Mumbai. I was having an exchange with a senior general officer in the Indian Army. In particular, we were talking about promotions to senior rank. I said that I thought the principal criterion was not “excellence at concocting strategy” or the like. Instead, I suggested that the “one question”/the first and most important query of candidates for a senior promotion:

*“In the last year [or 3 years, duration of current job], name the ... three people ... whose growth you’ve most contributed to. Please explain where they were at the beginning of the year, where they are today, and where they are heading in the next 12 months. Please explain ... in painstaking detail ... your development strategy in each case. Please tell me your biggest development disappointment—looking back, could you or would you have done anything differently? Please tell me about your greatest development triumph—and disaster—in the last five years. What are the ‘three big things’ you’ve learned about helping people grow along the way?”*

“Bottom line”/Accomplishment #1 = *The people we develop who execute and carry the torch for the things we care about—and then take the organization up, up and far beyond what we or they had imagined possible.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The sort of/character of people you hired in general. (And the bad apples you chucked out despite some stellar traits.)

*The people of all stripes who 5/10/20 years later say, “You made a difference in my life,” “Your belief in me changed everything.”*

A handful of projects (a half dozen at most) you doggedly pursued that still make you smile and which fundamentally changed the way things are done inside or outside the company/industry.

The supercharged camaraderie of a handful of Great Teams aiming to “change the world.”

Belly laughs at some of the stupid-insane things you and your mates tried.

Less than a closet full of “I should have ...”

A frighteningly consistent record of having invariably said, **“Go for it!”**

Not intervening in the face of considerable loss—*recognizing that to develop top talent means tolerating failures and allowing the person who screwed up to work her or his own way through and out of a self-created mess.*

*A stoic unwillingness to badmouth others—even in private.*

Dealing with one or more crises with particular/memorable aplomb.

Demanding ... **CIVILITY** ... regardless of circumstances.

Turning around one or two or so truly dreadful situations—and watching almost everyone involved rise to the occasion (often to their own surprise) and acquire a renewed sense of purpose in the process.

Leaving something behind of demonstrable-lasting worth. (On short as well as long assignments.)

\*\*\*\*\*

### **“Unremarkable” Except For ...**

I was talking with a friend about another friend. We marveled at his results—frankly, he wasn’t a very impressive fellow in the traditional “boss-like” sense. But then my friend said, **“You know, I’ve seen him working with people. He has what you’ve got to call a ‘magic touch.’ His quiet dialogues seem to leave the other person energized and confident.”**

Impressive in conventional terms?

Perhaps not.

Impressive/awesome at “people development”?

Absolutely!

And that, in the end is the “name of the Great Results Game.”

**“Bottom line”:** **“Unremarkable”**  
*except for RESULTS. A*  
**superb people developer—**  
**her/his folks invariably**  
**amazed at what they’ve**  
**been able to accomplish.**

\*\*\*\*\*

**Having almost always (99% of the time) put “Quality” and “Excellence” ahead of “Quantity.” (At times an unpopular approach.)**

**A few “critical” instances where you stopped short and could have “done more”—but to have done so would have compromised your and your team’s character and integrity.**

**A sense of time well and honorably spent.  
The expression of “simple” human kindness and consideration—no matter how harried you may be/may have been.**

**Understood that your demeanor/expression of character always sets the tone—especially in difficult situations.**

**Have never (rarely) let your external expression of enthusiasm/determination flag—the rougher the times, the more your expressed energy and bedrock optimism and sense of humor shows.**

**The respect of your peers.**

**A stoic unwillingness to badmouth others—even in private.**

***An invariant creed: When something goes amiss,  
“The buck stops with me,” when something goes  
right, “It was their doing, not mine.”***

A Mandela-like “naïve” belief that others *will* rise to the occasion if given the opportunity.

An abiding appreciation that “tough times make the woman/man.” Expressions of character—and the moment seized—when the yogurt hits the fan and others slink into their closets or exhibit a nasty streak is the Ultimate Performance Measure.

A reputation for eschewing the “trappings of power.” (Strong self-management of tendencies toward arrogance or dismissiveness.)

Intense, even “driven” ... but not to the point of being careless of others in the process of forging ahead.

\*\*\*\*\*

***“Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention  
of arriving safely in one pretty and well preserved  
piece, but to skid across the line broadside,  
thoroughly used up, worn out, leaking oil, shouting  
‘GERONIMO!’”***—Bill McKenna, professional motorcycle racer

\*\*\*\*\*

Willing time and again to be surprised by ways of doing things that are inconsistent with your “certain hypotheses.”

Humility in the face of others, at every level, who know more than you about “the way things *really* are.”

Having bitten your tongue on a thousand occasions—and *listened*, really really *listened*. (And been constantly delighted when, as a result, you *invariably* learned something new and *invariably* increased your connection with the speaker.)

**Unalloyed pleasure in being informed of the fallacy of your beliefs by someone 15 years your junior and several rungs below you on the hierarchical ladder.**

**Selflessness. (A sterling reputation as “a guy always willing to help out with alacrity despite personal cost and with no desire whatsoever to get “points” for your effort.”)**

**As thoughtful and respectful, or more so, toward thine “enemies” as toward friends and supporters.**

**Always and relentlessly put at the top of your list/any list being first and foremost ...**

***“of service”*** ... to your internal and external constituents. (Employees/Peers/Customers/Vendors/Community.)

**Treated the term “servant leadership” as wholly writ. (And “preached” “servant leadership” to others—new “non-managerial” hire, age 18, or old pro, age 48.)**

**Created the sort of workplaces you’d like your kids to inhabit. (Explicitly conscious of this “Would I want my kids to work here?” litmus test.)**

**A “certifiable” “nut” about quality and safety and integrity. (More or less regardless of any costs.)**

**A notable few circumstances where you resigned rather than compromise your bedrock beliefs.**

**Perfectionism just short of the paralyzing variety.**

***A self- and relentlessly enforced group-standard of “EXCELLENCE-in-all-we-do”/“EXCELLENCE in our behavior toward one another.”***

**Bon chance!**

**Remember: today, tomorrow, this week, this month ...**



\*\*\*\*\*

*“In a way, the world is a great liar.*

*“It shows you it worships and admires money, but at the end of the day it doesn’t. It says it adores fame and celebrity, but it doesn’t, not really. The world admires, and wants to hold on to, and not lose, goodness. It admires virtue. At the end it gives its greatest tributes to generosity, honesty, courage, mercy, talents well used, talents that, brought into the world, make it better. That’s what it really admires. That’s what we talk about in eulogies, because that’s what’s important. We don’t say, ‘The thing about Joe was he was rich!’*

*“We say, if we can ...*

*‘The thing about Joe was he took good care of people.’”*

—Peggy Noonan, “A Life’s Lesson,” on the astounding response to the passing of Tim Russert, the *Wall Street Journal*, June 21–22, 2008

\*\*\*\*\*

# Time to Revamp Leadership Training?!

## Start With a Quick Self-Assessment Test

Leaders should develop a vision for their enterprise, or the part thereof for which they are responsible.

*Fine.*

Leaders should get people excited about their work.

*Fine.*

Leaders should be masterful problem solvers.

*Fine.*

Leaders should have the highest integrity.

*Fine.*

Yes, all fine.

But, I contend, that's not close to being enough. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that those items, collectively, miss the boat. In fact, they're not even at the right dock.

What do leaders ... **DO?**

First and foremost they assemble and then develop a topflight team of people.

Here's the way I like to put it, which I label "Seven Steps to Sustaining Success":

*You take care of the people.*

**The people take care of the service.**

**The service takes care of the customer.**

**The customer takes care of the profit.**

**The profit takes care of the re-investment.**

**The re-investment takes care of the re-invention.**

**The re-invention takes care of the future.**

**(And at every step the only measure is EXCELLENCE.)**

**The obvious point: Developing people comes first. It is the "That without which there is nothing ..."**

The leader's job?

# Leaders “do” people.\*

(\*I have a slide that says: Leaders do people. PERIOD.)

I'd been doing some serious thinking (re-thinking) about leadership when I came across *Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better*, by Doug Lemov, Erica Woolway, and Katie Yezzi. It changed my life. I'm not actually sure about that, but I'm sure that it made me change my perspective. (I'd strongly urge you to read the book.)

In short, in excruciating detail, the authors make the case for directing almost all training toward the bits—not the whole. Integration must take place—but integrative training is actually wasted or even counterproductive if the pieces have not been mastered. I was already starting to head down this path, but *Practice Perfect* iced the argument.

So the story here will be simple in outline—challenging as all get out in implementation. I'm arguing—not exactly original—that leading, like football or music or theater, can be largely broken down into activities. And until those activities are trained in and practiced and more or less mastered, it's premature to deal with the high falutin' stuff like vision and values and energy and enthusiasm. (Vitaly important as these characteristics are!)

As you wade into what follows (if you choose to do so), I want to make one point clear. *Every* item below can be subject to study *and* training *and* practice *and* evaluation—e.g., re item #1, I don't want you to “get better” at listening. I want you to:

*Study listening—book or video learning or some such.*

*Subject yourself to intense training in listening.*

*Practice listening ceaselessly—with effective feedback.*

*Then practice some more. Then take refresher training with some degree of regularity.*

*(Slippage for bosses, assuming they get there in the first place, is the norm, not the exception.)*

*The goal: Become a full-fledged “professional listener.”*

*Hey, God alone knows how many hours you spent learning accounting and finance, marketing, etc. I want you to direct the same abundant energy on becoming, yes, a notable professional listener.*

*To get at this topic in short form, I'd ask you to take a quiz and to score yourself on a scale of 10, where 1 is awful and 10 is masterful. What follows are the essence-of-leadership activities (or a rough stab at them) I'd like you to self-evaluate:*

\_\_\_\_\_ I am what some call an “aggressive listener,” giving, without fail, intense, undivided attention to the speaker and very rarely interrupting; I am a visibly aggressive listener, attempting to be an implacable role model for aggressive listening.

\_\_\_\_\_ Listening is Item #1 in our set of Core Cultural Values.

\_\_\_\_\_ *I believe in “aggressive listening” so much that it is part of everyone’s evaluation and everyone must take annual refresher training in aggressive listening per se.*

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a full-fledged student of listening, aiming for the same level of “professional excellence” that I’d aim for in a specialty like marketing or finance.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am exceedingly meticulous about the exact construction of the questions I ask, always mannerly, always probing, always giving the person questioned space/time to formulate a thoughtful answer; my follow-up is not “soft” but is “supportive” to a fault. The questioning process is near the heart of effective leadership practice and I approach it with the gravity it deserves.

\_\_\_\_\_ I understand the complexity of and the power of excellent questioning skill. I am a formal student of the art and science of asking questions.

\_\_\_\_\_ I view meetings, which absorb an extraordinary amount of my time (and which always will), to be, by definition, my premier leadership opportunity; I do intense preparation for the most brief of meetings, and make it clear, beginning with body language, that I view the/any meeting as an opportunity, not an annoyance or distraction. I understand if I give off “another-damn-meeting” vibes, I will infect every participant in a flash.

\_\_\_\_\_ In meetings and every other interaction, I make it clear that we are all part of a civil society; vigorous debate is essential, but good manners, regardless of the passion for a particular position, matter a great deal.

\_\_\_\_\_ “Helping” sounds innocent/obvious, but it’s anything but; giving help must be meticulously tailored to each individual and her/his momentary circumstance. I have studied in depth the complex process of helping per se and I am able to help in a way that is useful and psychologically sound.

— Conversations—obviously—are the meat & potatoes, the hors d’oeuvres, main course & dessert of life. I have studied the science of conversations per se, learning and practicing the tools associated with making every communication/conversation count.

— *I believe in the Iron Law of Communication: Regardless of circumstances, if there is a miscommunication ... it’s my fault.*

— I believe in effective & extensive training with passion to the point of fanaticism. The quality of each of our training courses is routinely “breathtaking.” (And is evaluated remorselessly.) Our Chief Training Officer receives compensation and acknowledgement on a par with, say, the CFO; line trainers are chosen with the same care and rigor one would apply to hiring a research scientist.

— Appreciation and acknowledgement may be the most powerful forces in the universe, and I go out of my way hour by hour to connect with everyone I so much as pass in a corridor, and make them feel, by, at the very least, eye contact, that I

“get” their importance to our enterprise. I have ... *studied* ... appreciation/acknowledgement per se and understand analytically its stunning power.

— “Thank you”; I thank people for their contributions—small even more than large. Though “thank you” fits under acknowledgement, the TY words per se are “power words,” and I keep at least casual track of my daily “Thank you” score.

— “I’m sorry”: Effective apology, as research as well as common sense demonstrates, transforms (“transform,” strong but appropriate word) customer relationships and relationships among peers; I go out of my way to take rapid and visible responsibility for and the initiative in addressing the slightest of real or perceived screw-ups. Moreover, I have instilled recognition of the astounding power of this “tactic” throughout our group/workforce.

— I am always on the prowl for people who, unbidden, are routinely helpful to others, who will drop their own precious task in a flash to give a helping hand to someone who needs a hand at a critical moment. I make it clear that mutual helpfulness is a core “cultural” trait, which will be routinely acknowledged and formally taken into account in all evaluations.

*I believe in effective & extensive training with passion to the point of fanaticism. The quality of each of our training courses is routinely “breathtaking.” (And is evaluated remorselessly.) Our Chief Training Officer receives compensation and acknowledgement on a par with, say, the CFO; line trainers are chosen with the same care and rigor one would apply to hiring a research scientist.*

— Presentation excellence. Those of us who do not do manual work “listen” and “talk” for a living; together, talking and listening constitute our profession as leaders. Intense “professional” training in both is imperative—there is nothing in the least automatic about these skills. I visibly support and require presentation training and development; and practice ceaselessly to improve my own presentation skills.

— Body language is said to account for as much as 90% of our communication effectiveness. I am a student of body language, a relentless self-observer, and assiduous in turning body language per se into a primary trait of effective leadership.

— *Many say that hiring is the most important task in the organization. Assuming that’s more or less true, I can call myself and 100% of my leader peers true “hiring professionals,” avid students and practitioners of hiring excellence.*

— There is perhaps no more complex task than developing and executing an evaluation process that is a major/“Top 5” strength for our entire leadership population. (GE, incredibly, calls the evaluation process associated with its manager population the corporation’s #1 strength.) I have schooled myself in the intricacies of the evaluation process, instituted formal training in evaluation, and designed the evaluation process with the same care I would assign to, say, design of the budgetary process. All leaders are strictly evaluated on the quality of their evaluation practice.

— I acknowledge that time is my only resource—and manage accordingly. I evaluate in exacting detail my time allocation to insure that it visibly matches my espoused priorities. I evaluate daily, weekly, monthly with dispassionate rigor.

— In managing my time, I keep a substantial amount of my calendar open (25%+) in order to deal with the vagaries of the leadership job. I guard with zeal against the sin of chronic over-scheduling.

— I am expert at and an avid practitioner of MBWA/Managing By Wandering Around—the key to staying in touch and modeling core values and informally engaging employees. “Obsessive” MBWA effectively surpasses other priorities. I am thoughtful, not haphazard, in my approach to MBWA.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Am I an avid student of the process of influencing others per se—or do I trust my instincts since I’ve “been around”? There is a massive amount of research on this topic, and influencing per se should be considered a discreet skill to be studied and practiced and mastered.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have painstakingly made myself expert in understanding the complexity of the decision-making process. I am vividly aware of the (enormous!) biases that seep into the decision-making process, and work formally to address or reduce those biases—and instill this understanding and “studenthood” into 100% of the management corps.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am a brilliantly schooled and practiced student of negotiation. All jobs include at least informal daily negotiation, and negotiating skills are an implicit part of daily affairs. Training, of various degrees of intensity, is required of every manager.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Do I talk ceaselessly about the importance of execution, but assume that since it is an obvious priority it does not have to be a subject of directed study? This is especially the case for young/first-time managers. Hence, the conscious management of the execution process per se is a topic of study and practice.
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Do 100% of our employees have specific development plans/programs carefully designed and precisely tailored for them and on which they—and especially their managers!—are rigorously evaluated? Can any employee one stops in the hall talk cogently about her/his personal professional development plan and her/his progress thereon (and the degree to which she/he has been aided by her/his manager)? Is individual and collective and directly managed employee growth a part of our core value set?*
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am excruciatingly aware of the “d”iversity of my/our team. (I call it “lower case ‘d’iversity”—not the gender/race variety, but diversity on every-damn-dimension-imaginable.) I actively ensure, for example, that every team features an exciting mix of backgrounds that enhances the likelihood of their following interesting/creative paths to developing and executing projects of every shape and size.



\_\_\_\_\_ I am fully aware through study and analysis of the power/staggering value of gender-balance from top to bottom in our organization and relative to everything we do. I have a priority strategic program for addressing this issue/preeminent opportunity.

\_\_\_\_\_ Every leader/manager is exceedingly well trained in teambuilding per se. Every manager is assessed on her/his teambuilding skills and results. Attention to teambuilding per se is on the daily agenda of every one of our leaders.

\_\_\_\_\_ I fully understand that perhaps the most important asset—and determinant of our success on so many dimensions—is the full cadre of first-line leaders. We, for example, have the most extensive and effective first-line manager/leader selection and training and development programs in our industry, so good that they make one **“gasp”!**

\_\_\_\_\_ Everyone in the organization (100%!) is trained in “business”—that is, the way a business works, including the financial aspects thereof, so that he or she can have at least a rudimentary grasp of our overall place in the world.

***So: How did you do on this assessment exam?***

Perhaps not all that well. While nirvana is not likely, at the very least, heightened awareness may—I dearly hope—lead you to examine your own affairs and the development of leaders throughout your organization.

I will stand by my assertion that these are the things leaders actually do—minute by minute, day after day.

I will also stand ramrod straight by my assertion that each and every one of these attributes can be rigorously studied and practiced and mastered—that not a one is “instinctive.”

The elements again, in summary form ...

“Aggressive ‘professional’ listener.”

Expert at questioning. (Questioning **“professional.”**)  
Meetings as leadership opportunity #1.  
Creating a “civil society.”

Expert at “helping.” (Helping **“professional.”**)  
Expert at holding productive conversations.  
Fanatic about clear communications.  
Fanatic about training.  
Master of appreciation/acknowledgement.  
Effective at apology.  
Creating a culture of automatic helpfulness by all to all.  
Presentation excellence.  
Conscious master of body language.

Master of hiring. (Hiring **“professional.”**)  
Master of evaluating people.  
Time manager par excellence.  
Avid practitioner of MBWA/Managing By Wandering Around.  
Avid student of the process of influencing others per se.  
Student of decision-making and devastating impact of irrational aspects thereof.  
Brilliantly schooled student of negotiation.  
Creating a no-nonsense execution culture.  
Meticulous about employee development/100% of staff.  
Student of the power of “d”iversity (all flavors of difference).  
Aggressive in pursuing gender balance.  
Making team-building excellence everyone’s daily priority.  
Understanding value of matchless 1st-line management.  
Instilling “business sense” in one and all.

Have at it!