

The “Pull Leadership” Manifesto

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by Stever Robbins

Eighteen months after starting this column, business leadership still hasn’t reached perfection. Haven’t they been reading? Why is good leadership still so rare? Maybe it’s because we use a whacked-out definition of leadership. “Leader” has become code for “rich guy with an impressive title who orders others around.” But leading by giving orders left and right with no accountability doesn’t work. We’re living in a world of low loyalty, high mobility, and extreme uncertainty. “Push” leadership will push people right out the door. We need leaders who inspire others to follow, who engender loyalty. We need leaders who practice “pull” leadership.

Pull leaders don’t give orders; they create social systems that inspire people to join

They do it using principles that many people in official leadership positions wouldn’t follow if their lives depended on it.

Pull leaders take responsibility for the success of their organization and their people

Responsibility isn’t given; it’s taken. The loss of faith in American business starting earlier this decade has been driven by a batch of CEOs who have chosen not to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, even when the responsibility was required by law. Pull leaders take responsibility voluntarily, even when it’s optional. You want to change how your company does business, but you’re too junior to have an effect? So what! A corporate trainer saw students struggle with the company’s product, so he wrote up the shortcomings, proposed solutions, and sent the CEO a weekly dispatch. He took responsibility for leading a product quality effort, despite being a twenty-three-year-old new hire.

Pull leaders believe that success of the organization is their responsibility, no matter what their job titles are. They don’t have to

do all the work themselves, but they have to make it possible for everyone else to succeed. They lose sleep worrying if they’ve done enough for their people to be great in their jobs. They hope they’ve provided the right tools and training. They ask constantly how they can create a culture that helps others achieve. Because organizational success isn’t enough for them, pull leaders also take responsibility for helping their people succeed as individuals. They learn enough to encourage and support each person reach their goals, even goals that aren’t necessarily about work. Think about it for a minute. If you dream of attending a Red Sox game in box seats and your boss arranges it as a holiday present, wouldn’t you be inclined to be more loyal than if your boss gave out the usual all-expenses-paid trip to the annual cow tipping contest?

Pull leaders work to become attractive to others

In taking responsibility, pull leaders realize their greatest tool is themselves. So they work hard at perfecting that tool! You’d think Michelle LaBrosse of Cheetah Learning would be relaxing on a tropical island after building a highly successful multimillion-dollar business in less than five years. Nope. She reads constantly, attends top-level executive education programs, and is constantly asking how she can get better. Her people love her and she has no problem finding employees.

Becoming attractive isn’t just a matter of reading up on business. Pull leaders work on their interpersonal skills. They get their own lives in order, knowing full well that if they aren’t successful in their own lives, they don’t have the emotional well to draw from to be there for their people. Much to my surprise, in one Harvard Business School panel discussion, several highly successful CEOs mentioned that they meditate for fifteen to twenty minutes a day. They also advocated being socially involved and giving back to the community. By working to become better people, they became better leaders as well.

Pull leaders align and inspire with values

Values are the second most powerful force for bringing people together to achieve great things. Pull leaders know their own values, and demonstrate them when they act. And I’m not talking about impressive balcony speeches on “quality” or “competitiveness” or “valuing people.” Politicians give those speeches and aren’t exactly at the top of most people’s most-respected list. What matters to pull leaders are their values in action. They examine their own actions honestly and without judgment, discover what values they embody, and either change their behavior or choose to stand for the values they already embody.

The most powerful values message is sent when the pull leader is clearly taking a risk to stay true to his or her values. An engineer cared enough about quality to stand up in a department meeting and tell the development team that the decision to ship a low-quality product to meet a deadline was a betrayal of their commitment to quality. Risky? Sure. He could have gotten fired. But once word spread, he received great underground support as a steward of closely-held values.

Pull leaders are stewards of their organizations and employees

Stewardship is a key element of pull leaders. A steward is a caretaker of another’s property. A pull leader takes care of their organization and employees, without stepping over the line into behaving like the owner—even if they own 100 percent of the stock. Stewardship recognizes that organizations are created and maintained by everyone who works there. No matter who owns the stock, if everyone quits, there’s nothing left but an empty room.

In stewardship, a pull leader exhibits humility and appreciation for the organization they’ve started. Robert Cavett, founder of the several-thousand-person National Speakers Association, arrived at his annual conference banquet without his ticket. The new NSA member at the door refused him entrance. Rather than make a fuss with a melodramatic “Do you know who I am?” he returned to his room to get his ticket. His

graceful handling of the situation turned the door guard into a lifelong devotee when she later found out (much to her horror) that she had turned away the organization's founder.

Stewards don't own the organization, nor do they own its results. Part of their humility is giving credit where credit is due: to the people in the organization who made success possible. You won't find a pull leader trumpeting his own horn, but you will find him highlighting the hard work and dedication of his team.

Giving recognition is just one way pull leaders take care of their people. Did you catch that four-letter word? Yes, care. It's a concept we don't hear much about in business. Emotions are considered somehow undiscussable. Get over it, and start caring. Good stewards want people to succeed easily, not struggle. And they demonstrate their care however they can, maybe just with a birthday card or present. Maybe in much bigger ways. The head of a large nonprofit was also on the board of a local hospital. Employees needing medical care found themselves in a private room, receiving the best medical care available, and get well flowers by their bedside. He was a lousy leader in other areas, but people forgave his shortcomings and remained fiercely loyal when he showed he cared.

Pull leaders architect their social and organizational space

Pull leaders don't just let space and culture happen. They actively shape the environment in which people act. The most obvious shaping is physical. They decide if an office will be all cubicles, all offices, or a mix of both. They choose whether to keep the walls a pleasant beige—a color that offends no one and everyone at the same time—or take a risk with artwork, edgy furniture, and exposed brickwork in a loft. They pay attention to whether the space promotes the kind of interaction people need to be successful. For engineers, it may mean large open areas for collaborative brainstorming. For personal financial planners, it may mean quiet offices where they can meet their clients in private. Internet bubble companies were famous for foosball tables in funky spaces that attracted the best and

brightest employees available. The bubble burst, but the principle remains: space matters. It powerfully shapes culture, and pull leaders use it deliberately.

Actually, I've lied just a bit: Pull leaders shape the cultural space as well as the physical space. A critical part of culture is how decisions get made. If a pull leader truly believes in people, there's no better way to show it than to let those people take the lead in shaping the organization. Let them design the environment, set space requirements, and create the work world that will best lead them to success.

This is where we find the fundamental paradox of pull leadership: People most want to follow leaders who don't order them around, but rather give them the freedom and opportunity to be an active part in shaping their own lives.

Pull leadership isn't easy

Not many leaders practice pull leadership because, at its heart, it's about recognizing that the leader isn't perfect, and that an organization's power comes from everyone who comprises it. This flies in the face of America's deepest cultural image: the Wild West pioneer, staking out uncharted territory and holding it single-handedly. But rugged individualism is nothing more than a romantic myth in a world as complex as ours. If you doubt it, try living with a broken water main or no power for a week.

We can still look to the pioneer for inspiration, however. The pioneer's greatest quality is the courage to face the unknown—and that we still need in great measure. Developing pull leadership skills demands as much courage as that pioneer had, only this time the territory is mental. Develop the courage to admit you don't have the answers; the courage to admit your success depends more on others than on what you can do yourself; the courage to trust them; the courage to stand for your values even when it means making unpopular decisions; and the courage to rely on attraction rather than giving orders.

None of this is easy. But it's how the world works today, and the rewards of becoming

a leader who can inspire will be well worth the journey.

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