



The Silent Leader

BY JOHN HISKI RIDGE AND SUZAN KOBASHIGAWA

Have you ever met a lawyer or an academic who didn't think they were a great leader. Ever? Even one?

We may be the only two people in these two professions who do not want to be leaders. We love being a lawyer and an academic, and the thought of once again giving that up to push paper and deal with personnel problems seems . . . well . . . it seems terrible to us. If truth be told, we are not very good followers either. But that's a different story, and we're working on it.

Of course, in our various roles as self-proclaimed "non-leaders," we have experienced many different styles of leadership: some great, some good, some bad, some horrific. The difference between these categories often comes down to the different kinds of leadership

strategies employed by the different kinds of leaders. This article describes some of these practices, both good and bad. Our hope is that current and future leaders in our professions will care enough about being good leaders to conduct further research into these and other leadership strategies. In the end, however, we want to introduce you to a new strategy we consider optimal: silent leadership. This is not a stand-alone leadership model. It is a practice that enhances applied models, and we hope you will consider it as you work toward becoming better leaders.

That Necessary Qualification

The leadership strategies discussed below are general in their descriptions. As with leaders themselves, none of these practices are per-

fectly good or perfectly bad. Some are better than others, to be sure. But none should be employed without first identifying the need for their application and their appropriateness to any given situation. In other words, leaders should not simply employ leadership strategies to employ strategies; they should first figure out which techniques will best facilitate the success of their teams and the individual team members. Do the need-analysis work first, and then employ the appropriate strategy—that's the primary rule.

Those Better-Quality Leadership Strategies

We have personally seen the following leadership strategies successfully put into action over the past few years. The leaders who have employed these strategies have moved between them as needed to facilitate the success of their teams. We hope these leadership practices stir your interest to conduct further research.

Kaizen as an Employment Practice

Kaizen is a management strategy that emphasizes small, incremental improvements, rather than large paradigm shifts. When continuously applied over time, kaizen creates significant

and beneficial impacts to work product and employee skills development.

Leaders who employ kaizen understand that improvements in work product primarily come through small, incremental steps, not in large leaps and bounds. So they work to implement regular and continual product changes. To assist with this, employees are encouraged to provide suggestions. This is based on the understanding that it is the employees on the line who are most familiar with product functionality and how to improve it. Managers also engage with line workers on a regular basis to understand the full workings of the production lines under their control.

Employee skills development also comes through small, incremental steps. Effective leaders therefore provide regular opportunities for employees to improve their skills. These same leaders also listen to suggestions from employees about how to improve training processes, since the line employees know best what is needed. In short, the goal of kaizen is to make significant changes, but over time. This not only provides needed continuity, but also allows for continuous improvement.

Holding Space

Holding space is a leadership practice that allows all employees to have a voice, regardless of their backgrounds, personalities, gender identities, or level of experience. The concept of creating and holding space is widely used in psychology and therapy circles, but when adapted to leadership, it can cultivate innovative practices and a better workplace environment. Simply put, it refers to creating workplace cultures that listen rather than speak, that respect rather than dominate, and that accept the tension of not knowing while working through the problems and puzzles associated with a project, matter, or case.

Importantly, holding space is not just a psychological theory designed to make employees “feel” more valued, as the charge is sometimes levied. It is a vital leadership practice for globally focused firms and businesses because it rejects the concept of an absolute frame of reference, recognizes the need for diverse insights to problem solving, and promotes the importance of divergent viewpoints to a complete understanding of the issues.

Vision Casting

Vision-driven leaders articulate engaging visions, missions, and goals that inspire employees to support corporate values, purposes, and objectives. Vision casting helps provide direction to employees as they seek context for their everyday work. When combined with kaizen, vision casting can give direction to an agency, firm, or college while providing for a stable way to implement change.

“Do as I say” practices restrict creative thinking, destroy morale, and create abusive workplaces. Workplace bullying is also common among these leaders, so caution must be taken when subject to this type of environment.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a leadership practice that encourages individual and team engagement to assist in making decisions. Cases, projects, tasks, and decisions are seen as group work that is best completed when everyone participates and is invested. Instead of a top-down approach to leadership, collaboration takes advantage of each member’s expertise, whether a specific skill set, knowledge base, creativity, or insight.

The importance of collaboration is threefold. First, collaboration creates a sense of ownership among participating team members. Second, collaboration leads to a greater ingenuity and liveliness in thinking, as members bounce ideas off each other. And finally, because collaboration leads to greater corporate ownership, it helps employees buy into strategic visions and missions.

Leading as Service

Servant leaders focus on supporting their employees and facilitating the success of their teams. They recognize that their employees are intelligent, talented, and skilled, so they listen to their employees, identify the needs of their employees, and set about meeting those needs. They focus on empowering their employees, increasing productivity, and developing employee ownership of projects and work. In short, servant leaders are other-oriented and not solely interested in advancing their own power and careers.

Those Lesser-Quality Leadership Strategies

Besides the above strategies, there are also lesser-quality leadership practices. Some argue that there are times when these practices are needed. Maybe so, but we can’t come up with a single set of circumstances in the legal or academic markets that would justify their use. In fact, the only good thing these practices do on a consistent basis is increase employment opportunities in counseling services.

The “Do as I Say” Strategy

This leadership strategy is often employed by top-down driven leaders. They expect their teams to do as they are told and in the manner they are told to do it. These leaders frequently issue arbitrary team rules that have nothing to do with project completion but are designed to enhance the leader’s authority. The implementation of this strategy is not limited to experienced individuals either; it is frequently employed by new leaders uneducated in team management.

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The Practice of Homogeneity

Some leaders seek to produce homogeneity in their teams by creating uniformity in writing, reasoning, thinking, and opinions. We often see this strategy expressed in statements

such as “this is the team standard,” “this is the group think,” or “this is the way we do things.” What is really meant, however, is that team members are expected to think and act just like everyone else.

Homogenous leaders may even voice commitment to diversity and inclusion, but this does not include the freedom to think and speak differently from the group. They also hide behind claims of building a cohesive team, but cohesion simply means similar in thought and practice. Different ideas, ways of thinking, writing styles, politics, and speech or cultural patterns are all seen as tearing away at the team fabric.

The practice of homogeneity is simply a veil for similitude and is frequently employed by those seeking to enhance their own power and authority. We can’t figure out why an agency, firm, or college would hire highly educated

lawyers and professors and then stifle the very creativity and ingenuity their education was designed to produce.

The “Here’s a Great Opportunity” Strategy

This strategy is the practice of inequitably delegating tasks to others. On occasion, it provides opportunities for team members to build experience. But these opportunities come at a price. These delegators often pass along tasks solely to decrease their own workload, and when doing so, they fail to provide the support required to successfully complete the projects in a timely manner.

Ressentiment

Leaders suffering from resentment feel powerful when they judge others to be less than themselves. On the other hand, they feel threatened if they think a team member

may somehow exceed their own abilities. To maintain a feeling of power, these leaders often engage in management tactics designed to emphasize their superiority.

For those team members in the first category, resentment can be helpful because it feeds the leader’s ego to be seen as facilitating the success of these employees. But these employees need to be careful. Once they obtain a certain measure of experience and skill, they often become a threat and can find themselves on the other end of the spectrum. For employees in the second category, resentment causes leaders to engage in any sort of tactic designed to deprecate these employees, including gossip, backstabbing, and poor reviews.

The “Everything Is About Me” Strategy

We have all worked for leaders who employ this strategy, knowingly or unwittingly. The leaders tell endless stories about themselves, all the while believing their stories are helping team members develop and grow. They frequently interrupt meetings to express their own points of view; they take credit for work accomplished by other team members; and they frequently talk over team members to illustrate their own credibility and greatness. Team meetings become nothing more than self-validating monologues. These leaders can’t see beyond their own horizon to the harm they do to team morale and broader office relationships.

That Silent Leadership Strategy

Every once in a while, we come across a leader who quietly goes about the task of leading a team without seeking fanfare or accolades. Earlier this year, for example, John went through a particularly busy time in his practice. With several cases in queue, he didn’t have time for the management-created report writing he was supposed to complete. After several months, John found out that a supervising lawyer had ghostwritten the reports, and he had done so quietly and without recognition.

Silent leadership occurs when leaders take actions to help and benefit their team members but in a manner that doesn’t draw attention to their actions. It is a valuable leadership practice that creates unity, develops loyalty, promotes

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team success, and assists overworked team members. It can take many different forms.

Silent Assistance

This occurs when a leader quietly completes work for a team member without seeking fanfare or credit. This isn't about taking over high-profile work but doing those small and tedious tasks that get in the way of completing crucial work. This is illustrated by the report writing mentioned above. This silent leader didn't swoop in and take an oral argument or a trial, which may have benefited his own career. He quietly took on the mundane tasks.

Silent Credit

This occurs when a silent leader passes credit to a team member rather than inserting himself into the credit chain. Credit is a morale booster and often leads to further opportunities. Silent leaders recognize this and pass credit along to others.

Silent Support

It is not unusual for a team member to decline to talk to a supervisor about certain issues, such as personnel issues, depression issues, workload issues, or struggles with interrelationships. Silent leaders understand and acknowledge this.

Silent leaders recruit other team members to help support struggling employees. They trust these team members to solve any issues that have arisen. They also do not require supporting team members to report back because doing so would violate any trust between struggling and supporting employees.

Silent Listening

Have you ever worked for a leader who never stopped talking, never stopped offering advice, and never stopped trying to control your work? You want to tell them to "shut up," at least in the quiet of your own mind!

Sometimes team members just need to talk about their work. Sometimes they just need to work things out by vocalizing their struggles, issues, or concerns. Sometimes they just need to be understood. They don't need advice—they just want to be seen and heard. Silent leaders

know how to listen, and they know that silence is the best listening tool.

Silent Individualization

Every employee is different. Every employee has different skills and weaknesses. Every employee needs a different type of training, help, and assistance. Silent leaders understand this.

Rather than trying to develop homogeneity within their teams, which only makes the leader's work easier, silent leaders look for ways to assist each employee as an individual. For example, a silent leader may look to decrease the stress for one employee struggling with anxiety, decrease the administrative work for another with a heavy case or teaching load, and find administrative work that does not require long hours for a team member fighting cancer. Silent leaders search for distinct ways to help each individual employee. They don't subject all employees to the same characterizations and assistance.

Silent Appreciation

Silent leaders understand that little things are often more important than big sacrifices. It is the simple acts of appreciation that create a healthy workplace, such as sending a short thank-you note, buying lunch for a colleague engaged in trial preparation, or bringing a coffee to a teammate struggling with health issues. For example, during one particularly busy time, an anonymous person sent a card to a colleague with two simple sentences: "We see all the extra work you are doing. We want you to know you are appreciated and a valuable part of our team." That was it, but these were the right words at the right time to help this colleague get through the rest of a busy trial schedule.

Silent leadership is important because more than a few employees would object to assistance if they knew about it, and for many different reasons. For example, some team members may think that accepting help will cause them to look like they can't handle the job they were hired to do. Others would rather work all night than admit to a supervisor that a task or a case or a course was beyond their capabilities. Assisting in silence prevents the anxiety associated with having a boss help out, remove work, or assign tasks to another employee.

It requires more than a little confidence and self-assurance to be a silent leader. Insecure leaders look to create their own platforms and promote their own careers. Confident leaders understand that a team rises and falls together. The success of any one team member is the success of the entire team, and vice versa. By silently helping, silent leaders create success, even if individually they are not recognized for their silent contributions.

That Obligatory Conclusion

There is no such thing as a natural leader. Like any other skill, good leadership practices are learned behaviors requiring study and practice, and then more study and practice, and then even more study and practice.

What type of leader do you want to be? For those moving toward leadership, we hope you will ponder this question and grow from it. For those already in leadership, we hope you will engage in self-appropriation to discover what type of leader you already are—with all your good and bad qualities—and work to become better. As you are doing so, we hope you will give some consideration to the leadership strategies discussed above. And, most important, we look forward to hearing about the great silent leaders running the firms, agencies, departments, colleges, and institutions with which we are affiliated. **CL**



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