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An Adventure in Enlightened Leadership

Ed Oakley

Whether adventure means climbing mountains or striving to attain peak performance in an organization, enlightened leaders are dedicated to bringing out the best in others. They prepare team members for shared leadership so that others can play a role when the way becomes too treacherous, too complicated or too much for just one leader to handle.

In business we are literally climbing mountains every day of our lives. But on a recent hike through the rugged Canyonlands of Utah, I knew I wasn't at the office. Fear of failure takes on a whole new meaning when you're confronted with challenges that put your life at risk. This adventure helped me learn a lot about myself. And it helped me learn a lot about leadership.

Back in the safety of my office, I was struck by the significance of what I had experienced, especially as it relates to our company's mission, which is "to bring

out the best in organizations by helping to bring out the best in their people." Three points came to mind. First, it is neither fair nor realistic to believe that one person can be prepared to lead in every situation the team faces. Second, leaders emerge naturally as specific situations demand skills and attitudes that are inherent in them, as long as there is encouragement and freedom to do so. And third, we must create an environment that brings out the best in people, thus encouraging them to develop their natural leadership talents.

When focusing on these points, I realized that a team of hikers has many similarities with a team of workers. I'd like to share with you some of the insights I had during our hike in the rugged wilderness of Utah and how they apply to the rugged world of business.

No One Leader Can be Expected to Lead in Every Situation

I was leading the group on a trail that was getting smaller and smaller when suddenly I found us facing a very narrow ledge cut into the canyon, fifty feet above a chasm of rugged rocks. I was paralyzed with fear at the prospect of having to walk that ledge! I certainly would have turned back if that was an option. But it was getting late in the day and we had gone too far to

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return the way we had come without the provisions and gear it would have taken to spend the night outdoors. At this moment, given this specific situation, I was too afraid to provide any leadership whatsoever.

Just as I experienced a limit to my leadership capabilities on the hike, organizational leaders can find themselves in a situation where their skills and confidence level do not provide for the best leadership. This may be more common now because organizations require levels of expertise beyond anything they have previously known. The good news is that the solutions to virtually any challenge the organization faces can be met with the expertise that already exists within its people. By supporting others in the development of their natural leadership abilities, the "enlightened leader" prepares the organization to meet all of its challenges.

In traditional management, leadership was a matter of positional authority. The person with the highest rank was in charge and every one else was expected to do as he or she dictated. But that view has changed. In the chaotic, dynamic, changing environment we find ourselves in, it just doesn't work. Every one of us has the opportunity and, perhaps, the responsibility to be a leader, regard less of our positional authority. We assume leadership positions every day in our professional and personal lives. The questions to ask are: what kind of leadership are we providing and who is best suited to lead in a particular situation?

An enlightened leader is someone who is so clear that the power and effectiveness of an organization lies within its people that he or she is dedicated to bringing out the very best in them. This means knowing when to lead and when to follow someone you have helped prepare to be a leader. Just as my hiking group



Photo: Kevin C. Fisher

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enjoyed a rotation of leaders as it climbed through the canyons, today's organizations thrive on shared leadership and collaborative style decision-making.

Leadership Naturally Emerges When Encouraged to Do So

Only one of the people in our group had taken this trail before. So, we initially relied on him to be our guide. It was interesting to see how the group's leadership evolved as the hike progressed and we encountered difficult situations.

Every person in the group was very aware of and attuned to everyone else, just like the members of a well functioning team are in sync with each other in a business organization. As hikers, we each noticed who

performed well in which situations, who needed help where and how endurance fluctuated from person to person. As people gained confidence and felt comfortable with the various phases of the trip—hiking that led to climbing that led to vertical descents and so on—different people opted to lead the group.

When it became apparent that I wasn't going to lead the group across that narrow canyon ledge, it was obviously time for a new leader. A man who was near the back of the hiking group lowered himself over the trail's edge on our left and managed to work himself to the front of the line. He did this by hugging the cliff and feeling for handholds and footholds. A new leader had emerged!

The man had not demonstrated this kind of skill and confidence earlier in the day and so I had not known that he possessed it. But, throughout the day and through other experiences in his life, he had been preparing himself for a moment such as this. When his



Photo: Kevin C. Fisher

particular skills were needed by the team, and he was emotionally ready, he rose naturally to the leadership role to serve us.

There were others in the group who shared my fear about crossing the ledge and we turned to our new leader for help. He rallied our confidence and offered the kind of guidance that enabled each of us to find the courage to traverse the ledge.

Whenever a person chose to lead, as in this case, based on their confidence and desire to be first in the discovery of new territory, the rest of the group naturally recognized its appropriateness and willingly followed. We all benefited from shared leadership because the person who led served as an effective trail blazer—and their enthusiasm for the trail was so infectious that we all had fun!

In a business environment, people experience a similar desire to lead when they are feeling empowered. By inspiring a team to discover its own best answers and entrusting members with the responsibility to consistently work at peak performance, individuals are prepared to lead when the need arises.

Create an Environment that Brings Out the Best in Everyone

During another part of the hike, I was the first person to descend a particularly steep rock chute. Having gotten down with much less trouble than expected, I wanted to tell those who came after me how to do it. The next couple of people responded well enough to my direction, but when a woman who had been struggling with easier situations froze at the top of the chute, I became impatient. "Come on," I said, "just follow my instructions." "Wait a minute," the woman replied, "I need to look this over for myself!" I waited and watched in amazement as the woman took an

entirely different route than the one I had prescribed. She easily reached the bottom in less than a minute, beaming with pride and confidence at having navigated her own path.

I thought about this for a few moments, recalling times in the past that I had wanted to do something my way while being forced to do it according to my boss' instructions. These experiences had been very disempowering for me and had limited my energy, minimized my enthusiasm and kept me from doing my best work. So I took this opportunity to refrain from *telling* people how to come down the incline. For those who followed, I performed the role of coach, pointing out some of the options for handholds and footholds that people who had gone before them had discovered. Each climber took a somewhat different route and descended with a sense of personal accomplishment at having mastered this part of the descent themselves.

What a lesson I experienced: helping people find their own way is far more effective than telling people which way to go! This was certainly not the first time I had become aware of the fact that people want to do things their own way. But this real-life situation was such a powerful example of how people want to exercise personal control that it was like waking up to the concept for the first time.

Thinking back on this trip into Utah has helped me to be more centered in the work I do with organizations in the business world. It has renewed my appreciation for the fact that an enlightened leader not only helps to bring out the best in people, he or she must know when to stand aside to allow those people to exercise the skills they have been developing.

People resist being told what to do, but readily commit to their own ideas. Understanding this, enlightened leaders let go of their ego-driven need to have all the answers and allow people to implement their own ideas in accordance with a shared vision. To help people access those ideas, utilize "effective questions," that create a nurturing and supportive environment in which team members learn to fulfill their responsibilities with minimal direction.

Enlightened leaders know when to guide and when to let others go their own way.

As the first one down a particular path, an enlightened leader assesses the challenges that his or her team will soon encounter. Based on these experiences, he or she can coach those who follow in what they judge to be the most effective route to a given destination. But judgment is very personal. The best route for the leader will not necessarily be the best route for every individual on the team. To be truly effective, the leader acts as a role model but does not insist that the empowered members of the team do things exactly his or her way. That would defeat the value of empowerment.

It is the responsibility of enlightened leaders to create an inspirational environment that is conducive to the development of every person's natural leadership skills, an environment that enables people to find their own best answers. By presenting a larger perspective of a challenge and providing more questions than answers for meeting it, enlightened leaders encourage others to discover the solution that best suits their talents: to find their own best way down the mountain.

Climbing Mountains Every Day

The image that Doug Krug, and I chose for the dust jacket of our book, *Enlightened Leadership: Getting to the Heart of Change*, is of two mountain climbers silhouetted before a bright sun. The climber at the peak is reaching down to help the person below him. While we do not have any particular fascination with climbing itself, this image is truly an inspirational one for us. There seems to be a spiritual link between people who endeavor to climb a majestic peak and those who endeavor to renew an organization. The practical approaches to personal and professional develop-

ment that we present, and the forward-focused roles we describe for the leader in all of us, are equally applicable to people in a multi-billion dollar corporation and climbers on a mountain.

In the steep and rocky world of global competition which has become common for many organizations, we can no longer expect just one person to be able to provide the best leadership in every situation. The routes to success are too difficult to find and even more difficult to follow. They take us to unexpected cliffs where a fear of heights can stall a climb, and down into valleys where the endless terrain steals time and energy needed for the achievement of our lofty goal. We need a team of empowered trailblazers so that someone is always prepared to carefully guide us over the peaks and quickly through the valleys.

Whether hiking a trail or implementing a quality improvement process, enlightened leadership creates an environment that brings out the natural leadership abilities of everyone. It creates open and trusting relationships. It creates interdependence between team members based on people's strengths. It creates supportive relationships to compensate for members' weaknesses. It enables a team to conquer a mountain or master monumental change. Helping every team member access the expertise within them provides the enlightened leader with powerful answers to a question that is common to every person, on or off a mountain: how do we achieve our challenging objectives?

*Ed Oakley is co-author of **Enlightened Leadership: Getting to the Heart of Change**. His quest to bring out the best in people began in 1975 when he became a manager at Hewlett Packard. His success in the rapidly changing environment of this leading high tech firm was due to a unique blend of managerial skills and insight into human behavior. He co-founded **Enlightened Leadership International, Inc.** in 1987, inspired by the common quest he and his partner Doug Krug shared to bring out the best in people. The company is dedicated to helping people align their hearts, their spirits and their dreams and to take action in a way that creates an organization where there is joy in the work and satisfaction in the accomplishment.*