

ConnectIT
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The gentle leader

by Gregg Thompson

James Kavanaugh once suggested that there are "those too gentle to live among the wolves". I hope this is no longer true in today's organizations. I believe that the "wolves" have had their day and need to make way for a new breed of manager: The Gentle Leader. Today we need those special leaders who can create a real sense of community and commitment in our organizations. Leaders who see their role as one that serves the greater good, as one that puts the interests of others first, as one that creates places where the lowest of the low are treated with dignity and respect. Leaders who can galvanize people around an idea that stirs their deepest passions. Leaders who believe that position, privilege and wealth is earned only in service of others. Men and women who use words like compassion, sacrifice and forgiveness[^] mean them. Leaders who understand kindness and tolerance because these elements are evident in all of their decisions and actions. Leaders who have remarkable faith in others and draw their strength from this faith.

If you are one of these Gentle Leaders, I will admit that you have likely faced formidable opposition throughout your career. Your stellar people skills have been patronized and your collegial nature has been seen as weakness. Your superiors have encouraged you to sharpen your strategic leadership skills (usually code for "please do my job because I can't do it") and become more forceful in driving high performance (even though they would never admit to having their performance driven by others). Your teams have always quietly achieved extraordinary results but you have been unable to build any career momentum because you just don't fit the mold of the upwardly-mobile executive. You have been kept around because you are great at getting important stuff done but are not seen as tough enough to take on a real organization leadership role. I have good news for you...your time has come!

Why now? Simply because many of our organizations have been beaten up to the point of collapse and need the revitalization that can only come from a new kind of leadership. Your kind of leadership. A leadership that graciously sees the best in others, heals festering wounds and crafts a new, exciting story for the organization. And this is not just about being nice to people. This is a business imperative. The bonds of loyalty and commitment have been so weakened that many of our organizations are unable to take advantage of any economic upswing and will be left behind, irrelevant in the next economic chapter. A look inside these organizations reveals talented people who are now living out their careers in quiet desperation. These people are merely going through the motions each day and putting in their time. There is no shortage of advice for today's leaders. As engagement scores tumble, consultants and writers from previous eras are still imploring our leaders to "drive new behaviors", "hold people more accountable", and "get the wrong people off the bus". It's not working, and it's time for leadership that can inject fresh energy and enthusiasm into our organizations. It's time for The Gentle Leader.

Other leaders have had their time. During the past century we have been on a relentless journey to create commercial organizations that can survive and thrive in demanding and ever-changing marketplaces. Uniquely-gifted men and women have emerged to lead these organizations. From the early 1900's until the 80's our companies were dominated by **The Production Systems Leader** who organized us around machines and repetitive processes. This leader was needed to bring order and predictability to the horde of individual craftsmen who were trying to serve the emerging markets created by industrialization. This leader was followed by **The Quality Performance Leader** whose obsession with improvement in work systems and processes resulted in previously unimaginable levels of productivity. The year 2000 birthed today's **Opportunistic Enterprisers**, the "wolves" whose mission was to extract maximum value from the convergence of technology, globalization and fast-changing markets. They were asked to build lean, mean organizations, set big, audacious goals, exploit every market opportunity and be satisfied with nothing less than exceptional performance. And they have done this remarkably well. Maybe too well. We seem to have lost something important along the way. We have lost our organizational soul!

Many organizations have become cold and heartless entities that no longer nourish the human spirit and are now incapable of moving forward. In our pursuit of excellence and opportunity, we have somehow lost touch with the very purpose of organizations and have created entities that no longer satisfy our most basic human needs to be appreciated, to learn and to do work that really matters. When is the last time you saw a leader put community-building at the top of their priority list? When is the last time you have heard a leader speak about compassion and caring as if they really meant it? When have you seen an executive truly make a large personal sacrifice for the good of the lowest paid member of the company?

Can one become a Gentle Leader you ask? Yes, but it is not easy and certainly not for the faint of heart. It may very well be the most challenging transition of your leadership career. It requires exceptional courage, boldness and daring: the courage to confront your needs for accolades and recognition, the boldness to invite each and every member of the organization to put a hand on the organization's steering wheel, and the daring necessary to commit to a leadership agenda based only on duty and service to others. But the rewards are worth the effort. As a new decade dawns, you will be the leader who forges new pathways into the future. Now is your time to step up to real organization leadership. But watch out for the wolves.

They will not go quietly into the night.

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