

Interview with John Baldoni

LEADERSHIP EVOLUTION

John Baldoni has consulted executives and independent entrepreneurs on leadership for more than twenty years. He is the author of four books, including *Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders* and *Personal Leadership: Taking Control of Your Work Life*. He sat down with us recently to share some insight about leadership at different levels and how it has evolved over the years.

Leadership Wired: How has leadership landscape and culture changed during the two decades that you have been consulting?

John Baldoni: I think when we first started, hierarchy was everything. We've now evolved into more decentralized decision-making, but in times of crisis we go into hierarchy but all of us on the leadership side push for more front-line decision making, and that's really where it is because we're in a global economy with trends erupting anywhere in the world that can affect our businesses, even if we're not global enterprises. The whole, I think we've also realized that if we're going to grow a business we need to develop our people, and our people need to be allowed to achieve their potential, and that's the area where I work in.

LW: I assume that from your years of consulting, that was what provided you with *180 Ways to Walk the Motivation Talk* and *180 Ways to Talk the Motivation Talk*. Is that correct?

JB: Yes. Those are books I call my "grab and go" leadership. So often people are thrust into positions of management without any coaching. They're just told, "Jim, you're doing a great job for us, and, by the way, you're going to be promoted on Monday," and so all of a sudden they freeze, like deer in the headlights. "What am I going to do?" The genesis of those books is to give them some simple, "grab and go" leadership ideas that they can put into the workplace right away. I've come up with a little leadership model for 180 ways which is what leaders do--it's the leader model--they listen and learn, they energize their people, they act for the benefit of others, develop, empower their people and recognize.

And on Motivation Story, we talked about how you can motivate yourself, motivate a team, and motivate the organization. Now the secret in motivation is that we don't motivate others, we create conditions for them to motivate themselves. You can force someone; you can compel someone to do something, but how committed will they be? Not very, because they're living in fear. Better to excite them and create conditions where they want to motivate themselves; and you do that through open and honest communications, setting expectations, lots of feedback, providing growth opportunities, delegating responsibility and authority, those kinds of things.

LW: You've said that the purpose of leadership communications is straightforward: build great levels of trust and drive results. Talk to us a little bit about that.

JB: The essence of leadership communication is all about building trust. Leadership is an act of persuasion. If a follower doesn't trust someone, they can't believe in them and they won't do anything. It's a short endgame and so the outcome of leadership has to be results. If you're a leader and you're not getting things done--you're not achieving those results, then you're failing as a leader. Now, what communications can do is enable you to build that trust and drive those results. And I like to define leadership communication as a three-way process: it's speaking--speaking from the leadership point of view--and by the leadership point of view I mean doing what is good for the organization and for individuals. It's listening for understanding. Do you really understand what I'm saying? And be patient and make certain that the people do; and allow for feedback. Are you receiving my message? Is this a good message? And then the learning process is where the leader takes back what he or she has seen and heard. So it's a cycle--speaking, listening, and learning--and it renews itself.

LW: What do you see as the greatest challenge to leaders today?

JB: It's understanding that I can be a leader and that I can influence other people. Once you've accepted that challenge and accepted that choice, it's making time to lead and to understand that your most important job is to your other people. It's not that you don't do the work anymore; other people do it. You help them. Sometimes you may dive into the details, sometimes you may do the scut work; but most of the time, you're there to assist them. But really understanding the concept that "What I achieve is what we achieve" is the challenge.

LW: Discuss the idea of developing a leadership brand and how it affects organizational culture.

JB: A leadership brand should be a synthesis of an individual leader's convictions and beliefs, but it should be in harmony with the total organization. All organizations should be about honesty, integrity, and ethics. You have to have those. And your brand as a leader should complement that. What we often see in organizations is that a magnetic culture develops around the leader.

Take Southwest Airlines, for example. Herb Kelleher developed that culture along with everyone else. Although he is no longer the active CEO, the others seem to have taken that culture, so his leadership brand was very much of the people, but they looked to him for the leadership decisions. At the same time, you have to let people have their own decision making. So, Southwest Airlines was the brand of Herb Kelleher, which has been suffused through the whole culture. Now, other organizations don't have that, but the leader's values should be in harmony with the organization.

LW: How can leaders use the insights of marketing to rally employees behind them?

JB: Marketing is another act of persuasion, of putting a product out there and offering it to the marketplace, advertising it, promoting it, and making it exciting. You want to bring customers to your offering, whether it's a product or a service. Leadership is the same thing. Leaders put themselves out there and bring people to them; and what brings others to them is that power of their vision which should be in harmony with their organization; but on a personal level, it's that authenticity: "I believe in that individual." James McGregor Burns talks about the art of leadership as bringing others to embrace the same value system because they want to; in other words, your values are my values, and together we believe this. This is what we will do. So that's a twist.

Marketers are always actively communicating outwardly. They are making their products available. Leaders need to do the same thing. They have to be active communicators; they have to be seen, they have to be heard, they have to be available. That's another part of the marketing equation.

LW: One last question: Talk to us a bit about leading from the middle of the pack. Let's say you're not the head of an organization or a department. How can a person make an impact and influence change in the sublevels of management and leadership?

JB: There's a lot of literature coming about of leading from the middle. We see this in organizations where there are good, solid managers who promote their people and do what's good, and they're highly productive. But it's a perpetual squeeze; it's from the bottom and from the top. And a change initiative really has to be blessed from the top; otherwise, it isn't going to happen. But, if you want to push for things, the way you lead from the middle is to adopt the voice of the customer. If you want to change an organization, say, "This is what our customers want us to do. This is why we must change." Also, look at aligning that with the development needs of your people. Say, if we want to go there, we need to offer more training to our people, we need to develop them more, we need to give them more job rotation, we need to change job designs, all those kinds of things together. So it's a symbiotic process. It really comes down to personal leadership--the integrity, the sense of autonomy, initiative, the desire to make a positive difference, responsibility, and willingness to be accountable. And I think accountability's the most important thing. A good term for managing from the middle is being a beacon of integrity.

