Leadership and Human Nature

Leaders sometimes need a reality check and an attitude adjustment

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THERE’S A MOMENT in the classic film Casablanca I especially enjoy. Czech freedom fighter Victor Laszlo has stirred up the patriotic fervor of the guests at Rick’s Café, and the Nazis are not pleased (the time is 1942). An incensed Major Strasser marches up to the cheerfully corrupt French policeman, Captain Renault (Claude Rains), and orders that the café be closed immediately.

“But I have no excuse to close it,” Renault protests.

“Find one!” snaps Strasser, and exits.

Renault blows his police whistle.

“Everybody is to leave here immediately! This café is closed until further notice! Clear the room at once!”

Rick (Humphrey Bogart) protests. “How can you close me up? On what grounds?”

“I’m shocked!” says Renault. “Shocked to find that gambling is going on in here!”

At precisely that moment, Rick’s croupier walks up and hands Renault a wad of bills.

“Your winnings, sir,” he says with a courteous bow.

“Oh, thank you very much,” says Renault, pocketing the cash. “Everybody out at once!”

Rick walks away rolling his eyes.

“Shocked” at human nature?

I often think of Captain Renault when listening to frustrated managers vent their complaints about employees.

“When are they going to do what they’re supposed to do without me making them do it?

“Why do I have to keep saying the same things over and over?”

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“He’s always getting away with stuff by finding loopholes in the policies!”

I sometimes reply, “What? People have to be followed up about their assignments? What? People have to be supervised? What? People test boundaries to see if they’ll move? … I’m shocked … shocked to find people exhibiting human nature!”

I’m being facetious, yes, while making a serious point. Mature leaders don’t get “shocked” when they encounter normal human nature. Human nature is as predictable as the sun rising or the law of gravity.

**Dealing with human nature as it is**

Let’s review some common sense points about human nature.

- **It is natural to want to go our own way.** We want to do our own thing. People don’t naturally enjoy having to abide by rules and boundaries. This applies to everyone: frontline employees, managers, executives, physicians, board members.

- **It is natural to want to test limits to see if they will move.** A great deal of human ingenuity and effort is applied toward the goal of getting outside the boundaries or finding loopholes in the system. People can be quite ingenious and determined!

- **It is natural to try to avoid responsibility when we fail to do what we should.** When we fail in an area of responsibility, our natural response is to deny, rationalize, make excuses, or blame someone else.

- **Growing in maturity is possible … but it is not inevitable.** Lest the previous three points seem too negative, let me say here that many, perhaps most, people grow into mature, principled adults. But many don’t. Chronological age is no guarantee of corresponding maturity. I’ve known 20-

somethings who were amazingly mature and 60-somethings who acted like kindergarteners. Maturity doesn’t happen by itself. Character is the result of **habitual choices over time.**

- **Maturity does not change human nature; it bridles it.** None of us is perfect. We all have weaknesses and faults, no matter what our level of development. If we have grown into a person of mature character, that doesn’t mean we have lost the capability of expressing less admirable parts of our nature. It just means we have developed higher standards and habits that override them. That’s why all of us — every human being — needs some measure of accountability in our lives.

**The disposition of a mature leader**

How should a mature leader respond to the reality of human nature? I sum it up in three points: Comfortable Acceptance, Confident Expectation, and Continual Leadership.

1. **Comfortable Acceptance**

Comfortable acceptance means, first, that you aren’t bucking against reality. You accept that you are working with ordinary human beings, all of whom have good points and bad points, strengths and weaknesses, virtues and faults. Peter Drucker said,

**We are not going to breed a new race of supermen. We will have to run our organizations with men as they are.**

Working with “men as they are” means people need leading and managing. It is a genuine challenge to influence a group of people to work together, but that is what leaders do. Comfortable acceptance means that you as leader accept this role without complaint.
Many times I’ve listened to a manager gripe about his or her employees when the real cause of the group’s dysfunction is a glaring lack of leadership. Groups simply don’t spontaneously cooperate effectively and harmoniously. They instinctively look for someone to lead. Even a pickup basketball team, for example, selects a de facto captain.

Mature managers maintain a comfortable acceptance of their responsibility to provide leadership, give expectations, organize a group’s activities, offer guidance and help, and hold people accountable for performance and behavior. None of this is “shocking.”

2. Confident Expectation

Confident expectation begins with the knowledge of who you are. It means you have a “badge” and know you have it. You don’t have to prove to anyone you’re the leader or possess authority. In fact, managers who think they must regularly “show who’s in charge” are merely demonstrating their own weakness and inability to win followers.

As a leader, it doesn’t occur to me to think, “How can I make people follow me?” Instead I consider, “How am I doing at being worthy of being followed?” If I have a badge of authority granted to me from above, and if I can with integrity say that I am setting a proper example in my own behavior, I don’t worry about proving my authority to lead. I assume it.

Confident expectation also means that I believe in the good intentions of most human beings, and in the potential of each one to contribute value in his own way. The question is, “How can this person contribute to the success of the team?” That’s what Peter Drucker had in mind in his emphasis that the role of leadership is “to make strengths effective and weaknesses irrelevant.”

Mature leaders don’t focus on and obsess over what people can’t do; they look for what individuals can do and put them to work. Like athletic coaches, they aim to “put a person in a position to be successful.” Because they possess this quality of confident expectation, they impart confidence to their team regarding their progress toward success.

3. Continual Leadership

How long do you have to maintain these attitudes and actions? As long as you are leading people. Mature managers do not cry out to the heavens, “How long must I keep supervising these people?” Rather than obsessing over what people “ought” or “should” do (two words that are among the biggest wastes of time and breath), they accept the reality of human nature for what it is. They simply keep plowing ahead toward continuous development, improvement, and accomplishment, knowing that the majority of people will respond positively to effective leadership.

To employees who demonstrate through a track record of behavior and performance that they are mature and dependable, you can grant more freedom and responsibility. To those who demonstrate that they need more supervision, you give it to them. And you keep persistently and positively leading your team to greater performance.

None of this is “shocking.” As my friend and mentor, Dr. Henry Brandt, used to say, “It’s just the nature of human nature.” Leaders and managers, that’s why you’re needed. You have one of the most vital jobs in the world: Leading teams to significant and impactful achievement.