

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The Level 5 Leader

True leaders do not need a spotlight to shine.

Leadership is not a star-studded affair. Rather, it is a difficult undertaking requiring a combination of persistence, determination, elbow grease, empathy, peasant toughness, honor and kindness.

The greatest leaders I have known have not sought the spotlight but have labored without fanfare, accepted the moments of loneliness and doubt inherent in the work, passed the credit to others in victory, and claimed an unfair level of responsibility in the face of failure.

During the pinnacle of the Greek empire, the battle galleys were ships powered by oarsmen situated on multiple deck levels. Those who rowed from the lowest levels of the ship were referred to as *huperetes* — under rowers. They labored in concert with one another to power the vessel towards its mission — their work was below deck and unseen, but absolutely essential to success.

The under rower is a model to help frame effective leadership. Jim Collins, author of the exceptional work “Good to Great,” found the exceptional companies had what he called “Level 5” leaders at the helm — his description of those leaders follows:

“The good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results ... It is very important to grasp that Level 5 leadership is not just about humility and modesty. It is equally about ferocious resolve, an almost stoic determination to do whatever needs to be done to make the company great.”

Yet the image of the *huperetes* and the Level 5 leader is in stark contrast to contemporary culture’s fascination with celebrity status. The leader as celebrity model has led to choices driven more by personality than competence.

For example, the cult of personality is evident in the drift of journalism from unbiased analysis to competing on entertainment value, while social media feeds the need to be recognized and to measure success by the number of “likes” rather than actual performance. Too often in many walks of life, projecting an image has supplanted substance while attention-seeking behavior has been glamorized over the

time-honored traits of diplomacy, servanthood and collaborative problem-solving.

Increasing leadership levels

In the face of popular cultural trends, can we reignite the development of Level 5 leaders? As Collins pointed out, not everyone is capable of achieving the full characteristics of Level 5 leadership. However, people are capable of developing themselves into increasing levels of leadership effectiveness through consistent and intentional effort.

Peter Drucker is perhaps the most prolific thought-leader in the realm of business leadership. Collins points to the foundational leadership lessons gained from his relationship with Drucker:

1. First manage thyself.
2. Be useful.

The beauty and power of these two concepts is such that they should be at the forefront of our daily reflections and goals.

I am so very grateful to have encountered exceptional leaders who have embraced the principles espoused by Collins and Drucker and have taken up the oar to be useful —

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to have had a meaningful effect on the world. One particular experience comes to mind when I think about intentional and effective leadership.

Modeling leadership

It was a beautiful May morning nearly 30 years ago, and I had brought a group of university students on a beef industry tour that included a visit to the Bradley 3 Ranch near Childress, Texas.

We had been warmly and genuinely greeted by Minnie Lou Bradley. She had made each and


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every one of those students feel as if they were a valued guest. As the tour and discussion progressed, Minnie Lou Bradley formed a connection with those young people.

They were standing in the middle of a cattle pen engrossed in conversation with her and each other

— fully engaged, creating a level of energy that nearly crackled in the air. Many of that group have gone on to serve as key industry-leaders, establish innovative companies and become role models in their own right.

It was a magic moment watching someone model the best of the under-rower spirit as she served the next generation — what a blessing to witness a true leading lady. 

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- Inky Johnson*