

Leadership: What's Your Stake?

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What leadership model best fits today's work setting? With businesses worldwide struggling through an unusually blurry economic, financial, social, and political environment, managers inside cash-strapped companies are faced with an unprecedented challenge that is unlikely to resolve anytime soon. The responses and answers leaders have relied on for decades no longer apply.

Followers of the old models—authoritarian, task-oriented, relationship-oriented, and supportive—find it difficult to cope in context of these complex times. The institutions and approaches that seemed to work for the past 50 years are not capable of managing the intricacies and flux of our interdependent world.

We believe that a new style of leadership is needed, a style that transcends earlier models. This new kind of leadership must be versatile and flexible enough to adapt to the complexity of this modern world. To be effective and move forward, leaders must adjust their operating mode to one that is malleable enough to respond to and withstand rapid change. Under the current pressures, the new model must be focused enough to support ever increasing performance expectations. At the center of this adaptive management model is the "Leader's Stake."

The kind of leaders needed for these times are able to take passionate action without becoming attached to the result of those actions. They establish a stake, a shared goal, something that is worth devoting one's life energy to. The powerful impact of leaders is directly correlated with the compelling nature of the stakes they set for their groups or organizations.

To understand what a stake is, you must understand what it isn't. It is not a goal. "Make more profits." "Increase sales." "Improve productivity." All these are not stakes. They are the goals of managers. Goals are practical milestones towards a specific end. Goals don't inspire or compel, they identify steps along the way.

Some people create compelling statements about the passions that motivate them. In coaching we call these Life Purposes. "I am here to make a better world for my daughter's children." "I wake up each person that I meet to the preciousness of every moment." Life Purpose statements can define your actions and inform the stakes that you do set. But they are not yet a stake.

Stakes arise from your personal mission on this planet. Leaders have a life purpose that calls forth their most authentic and full self. While the landscape may change and different kinds of currents may happen, the "river" of purpose is ongoing. It forms your orientation to any stake you will choose to set.

A Leader Stake is planted when a leader takes responsibility for an event that calls for his or her leadership. This Leader Stake becomes the lens that the leader looks through in regards to everything concerning the event. The leader is tethered to this Leader Stake so that it becomes the orientation point for all that occurs around this event. If the leader should begin to drift away from the stake, it is compelling enough and planted firmly enough so that it pulls the leader back.

For example, your life purpose statement might be "With love and authenticity, I inspire everyone I touch to become a more alive!" That purpose will inform all the stakes you set. Imagine you and



another person are designing a staff exercise. The two of you may co-create a stake that you and your co-leader share for this particular staff exercise. It may be something like, “Intimacy and connection open the door to boundless creativity!” You can easily align to that stake because it is so in line with your life purpose.

That stake may also be embedded in the corporate stake of your organization. At CTI our corporate stake is, “Coaches Training Institute is a contextually based, experientially driven, transformative learning environment.” Each stake gives resonance and energy to the next.

Stakes have a definite boundary in time and space. This sets them apart from Life Purpose Statements, Mission or Vision Statements. They are specific to a certain group of people and exist within a specific period of time.

Here’s how it could sound for another leader: A personal life purpose statement (“Using compassionate honesty, I empower everyone in my life.”) aligns with the team stake (“As long as I manage this project, everyone on this team feels like he or she is a co-owner of this company!”) embedded in the division mission (“We are redefining the concept of outstanding customer service!”) set in the corporate vision (“One phone company, one world!”)

Once you are clear about your stake, how do you implement it? You take action. But action for the sake of your stake. These days, we see many leaders who act only for the glorification of their ego, or they lay themselves out as a sacrifice to the people.

However, truly effective leaders that are worthy of our deep admiration can usually be seen stepping forward not knowing what the outcome will be and not trying to control it. They step forward with all that they have, their full range of abilities out and ready. Yet, at the same time they take complete responsibility for the impact of this full permission on the people around them.

It is a paradox of sorts that they are stepping into. Leaders have to be able to say, “I will use everything in myself for the sake of the stake. I will bring the full range of emotions and expression to the party and I will step in with all that I have in every moment with nothing held back for the sake of that stake. And at the same time I will be attuned to the impact of my leadership and I will stay conscious, aware, and take complete responsibility for whatever emerges from me.”

When you put those two things together you have a leader in action, serving a compelling and important stake, with all of what they have and taking complete responsibility for who they are being and what they are doing.

In a business environment, a Leader’s Stake can provide leverage to create enough momentum to move an organization or team toward the solution of a challenge or problem. There are some types of problems where the solution is already known. By simply holding an intention and accessing a little more information or expertise a person may be able to solve the stated problem or make a specified change. Harvard’s Ron Heifetz refers to this as a “technical” problem.

For a leader to adopt a style that transcends earlier models, that leader must understand that not all changes can be made by merely accessing additional information or expertise. For these challenges, an “adaptive” approach is required. Einstein captured the conundrum by saying “our biggest problems are never solved at the same level of thinking that gave rise to them.”

When a leader learns how to articulate and work from their Leader’s Stake, that leader is making the



transition from technical learning to adaptive learning. This new learning mode is a critical skill shift in the transition to the new leadership model. Adaptive change requires a leader to develop, to shift perspectives, and to change existing habits and automatic reactions. This type of change takes time, focus and accountability. In cultivating the new malleable operating mode, a leader needs to revise how she views herself and our world and what she believes is possible. That is a portrait of a new leader.