

# APEX THINKING

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A GUIDE TO LONG-TERM LEADERSHIP FOR THE RISING CEO

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# CHAPTER 1: MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

**I**t is a misperception that essential differences exist between top leaders in education, the business world, or the religious and civic sectors.

In any form of organization considered, the axiom that some people basically seek to control or lead other people is true. Whether in white collar jobs, industry, education, government, or volunteer positions, someone is working to place himself in a position of dominance over others. Those in the business world often use the phrase, “cut throat competition.” To assume this attitude and practice does not exist in an organization is naïve. Believing that members reach decisions through consensus and by committee, or that they accomplish very much by being nice and by being bright, is also naïve. Being nice, being smart, and working hard are not the essentials of corporate achievement. Power, politics, games, roles, decision making, and a whole host of other factors are common considerations in all forms of leadership and administration and indeed, any group activity. This reality is one that apex thinking acknowledges and embraces.

### To Work Harder or Smarter

A traditional part of the “American Dream” promises that success is assured for anyone who is willing to work hard, make sacrifices, and stick to the straight and narrow. After all, any U.S. citizen born in this country can grow up to become its president!

This belief that hard work leads to ultimate success is based on the American experience, our Judeo-Christian ethic. In reality, working hard, per se, accomplishes relatively little. One discovers that it’s not how hard he works, but how “smart” he works that makes the critical difference. One needs to be able to separate the two and understand the value of each.

Hard work by itself has proven to most executives that it leads to little more than premature gray hair and hemorrhoids resulting from a lot of pain, frustration, and stress. The successful CEO is one who “works smart” and understands the difference between solely working for himself or herself and working with other people to accomplish a goal. “Working smart” means using other people, as often and as advantageously as possible, to expedite goals and objectives. Additionally, it requires an understanding of and the ability to engage and manipulate the dominant personalities in the games that are played to accomplish the goals and objectives of any organization.

These games usually include the adoption of power plays, politics, and public relations, among other elements. Learning how to use these leadership tools and skills to manage successfully in the everyday business world is what is meant by “working smart.” It requires a certain amount of “savvy”—or trained instinct—about human behavior, group interaction, and

the dynamics of circumstances that create specific kinds of environments. All of these variables change constantly and are part of the game at hand. The winning chief executive is continually in touch with and on top of these shifting conditions.

### **Integrity as a Viable Option**

A third misconception about life at the top is that those who make it do so because they exemplify positive human behavior – honesty, integrity, and morality. It doesn't usually take too long after entering the work force for most of us to see that the "good guys" don't always come out on top. Unfortunately, there is another side of the success story which, sometimes, involves negative characteristics which we generally, in our society, consider inappropriate within our leaders. Nevertheless, people who have the ability to employ politics, instill fear in subordinates, and make power plays that often require hurting others also make it to the top.

The bottom line to the notion that people need only demonstrate they are upstanding to prosper is that they will never be successful if the only thing they have to work with is good intentions. Successful executives permit themselves other options. In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that the person who exemplifies only good is the person who has never recognized the need to outweigh or off-balance bad.

At times, it may become necessary to take drastic measures in order to simply maintain a prominent position. The situation may demand that to play the game effectively, one must use "bad" to balance "bad," if not necessarily to "do unto others before they do unto you!" When an unfair situation threatens to arise, it might become necessary to counter by, theoretic-

cally, exercising unfairness first in order to survive. War is one example. Somebody commits an evil by starting a war and another counters war by also engaging in it. In modern times, the political policy of pre-emptive strike has been recognized as crucial in the defense of the United States against terrorism. While some consider the policy a controversial one, no one can deny the clear message it communicates regarding the country's refusal to be victimized by others.

It is interesting and useful to note that what is basic in life is often basic in leadership as well. This discussion leads to an essential question of ethics. Is it necessary to “back-stab” someone in order to get to the top? It is doubtful that this should be a tenet to which anyone should subscribe. Quite often, however, the person at the bottom of an organizational ladder only sees bloodletting as people compete and move up through the organization. Granted, there are times when those competing for scarce rewards, such as the top job, get hurt in the process. Still, this is not a mandate or an excuse for hurting someone in order to achieve a goal.

The point here is that an individual may condemn his or her own chances for success if he or she completely rules out returning like for like, when and if the situation demands. On occasion, one may even find that survival requires it. Those, however, who make a standard practice of stabbing other people in the back and of using other nefarious techniques to garner power will find that if they use this play as their strategy for moving up the ladder, they will eventually end up suffering the same fate. Richard Nixon's administration—with its illegal surveillance tactics and the president's resulting impeachment—seems to be an appropriate example.

Worn out and cliché though it is, “those who live by the sword generally end up dying by the sword.” Look at the numerous youth who adopt violent gang culture as their lifestyle and end up deceased before their twenty-fifth birthday. While the cut-throat actions of some might imply otherwise, one does not have to be vicious to be competitive. Apex thinking requires only that you enjoy competition, become clever, resourceful, and use available options to accomplish a given goal.

Do not be surprised by the devices and machinations of others. Prepare for anything. Others may not, and frequently, will not, choose to be as scrupulous as you.

### **Might Does Not Always Make Right**

The belief that one may, once at the top, eliminate the use of force, deceit, or power which may have been employed to get there in the first place is not correct. It is certainly true that force can be used to gain power in an organization. Subordinates can be forced into behaving in a certain way. Competitors can be maneuvered into a subordinate relationship. However, power that is acquired through more acceptable means, such as communication, gives more credibility over the long term.

When a chief executive operates with the philosophy that might makes right, he is conceding that force will be required to achieve objectives and goals at all times. This is neither a good way to attain a high level leadership position nor sustain one. The aspiring CEO who gains power through means other than force will survive longer and more harmoniously.

It is also interesting to observe that those individuals who habitually resort to questionable, and coercive—even slightly

to one side of being legal—tactics over the course of their career to accomplish various goals, lose objectivity regarding “right” and “wrong,” or “good” and “bad.” They become accustomed to rationalizing their behavior to spare themselves, in their own minds at least, the loss of their personal sense of worth. They become conditioned to the point where they can no longer honestly distinguish good from bad with the dictates of acceptable personal or business ethics. What is good becomes that which is useful and helps the individual to accomplish whatever he may deem desirable. What is bad is anything that may obstruct his wants or needs or goals. He becomes the ultimate pragmatist: what works is good.

Anyone who ascends the career ladder successfully will encounter several such pragmatists, both in the areas of one’s personal career interests and in other endeavors. Some are more potent and dangerous than others. Their adopted policy to sacrifice all in the name of personal satisfaction is an unfortunate by-product of many who acquire power and handle it poorly, or rather, allow it to handle them! The most common and recognizable example to the average person would be the type of professional politician who indulges in unscrupulous conduct as a matter of course. Rather than utilizing power to better serve their constituency, they allow it to seduce and corrupt their ego.

The important thing to remember is, as one accomplishes the various plateaus of a career climb and begins to deal with the “headiness” of success, don’t allow it to destroy your better sense of judgment, necessity, and analysis. Anything which clouds one’s objectivity is personally dangerous for a number of reasons. For one, it could get in the way of a

person's ability to "size up the competition," and that would be a fatal error. Make no mistake about it!

### **Not All Rules Are The Same**

People often hold a misconception about others with whom they work or compete in their career pursuits. Many entering the competition for moving up an organizational ladder assume they compete with people who are like themselves. They tend to believe that other aspirants play the same game by the same rules while sharing common attitudes and values about competition.

In fact, there are as many different plans and programs for achieving goals and objectives, and as many different attitudes and sentiments and values, as there are competitors. The danger is in the assumption that everyone is alike. This belief quite often causes one to treat other people as one would like to be treated. However, one must recognize that everyone plays the success game differently. They employ slightly modified rules that depend upon the prize and the level of competition. Also, these personalized rules also derive from an individual's perception of what is acceptable and strategic behavior for him in that situation.

It is essential to remember that many competitors' rules often include the notion that "anything goes." The earlier in a career one understands variations in attitude, and the unlimited extent to which others may go to accomplish their goals and objectives, the less likely he/she will become one of the "casualties" of the process. The assumption that all competitors play the game by the same rules may well cause one to lose a major battle, if not the entire war.

**Know Human Nature**

Another popular misconception is that only the best and the brightest make it to the top. A lot of bright people do succeed but there are different types and degrees of brilliance. Being bright in professional skills or technical expertise does not necessarily equate with being bright in the kind of social skills essential to survive in top line administration.

Perhaps you have read, on the other hand, that most people who get to the top of an organization are neither those who made straight A's in college nor scored highest on an SAT examination. Instead, they are often those who made average grades. Whatever their GPAs may have been, they have all had to learn something about the subtleties of human nature in order to interact effectively with opponents as well as allies. Fine tuning your communication skills, learning about the difference between spoken language and body language, and studying personality types as well as social types can enhance your overall understanding of people. Such insights serve as important tools for those serious about moving forward in their quest for executive leadership. The bottom line is to be as brilliant about the ways of human nature as about the profession you have chosen.

**Leadership Theory—Leadership Practice**

Still another misconception that many people hold concerns the significance and importance of executive leadership theories. This seems especially important today when comparing the business acumen and production of Asian countries to American industry organizations and productiv-

ity. An important question to consider is this: How vital are theories about management for a successful leader? This issue is particularly relevant since not all who become successful executives attend schools of leadership or business administration.

It is very useful for any aspiring or senior level leader to have some framework within which to think. One needs an understanding of at least basic theoretical definitions, such as those presented in the introduction. Some notion of what an organization is all about, and a general idea of planning, forecasting, and decision making provides important basic knowledge. But it is far more important to look at the practical hands-on aspects of leadership rather than the “how-to” of management in the theoretical sense.

Many believe that graduate school studies in business administration, public administration, or leadership adequately prepare people for life in the executive world. A more accurate assessment would be that professional education provides a good foundation from which to begin learning about that world. Graduate training certainly helps to discipline and to organize one’s own thought process.

However, beyond the classroom, the ability to make practical and pragmatic decisions rules the executive leadership scene. Theories do not always operate in practice as they do on paper, particularly in our modern world of rapid growth and global change. It may be that people do not understand theories well enough to implement them effectively. Perhaps they cannot determine their applicability in actual situations of working with people. Not all those who teach theory in graduate school have had practical experience for effective executive leadership. Often, they have been limited to research.

If theory helps to structure and broaden perspective, too much reliance on theory as a leadership tool can cause one to depend so much on “the letter of the law,” that one begins to distrust his own intuitive abilities. Such abilities, or “gut level” reactions, can figure significantly in effective decision making.

Top executives characterized as highly effective (a top executive isn’t always, much to the surprise of many) often attribute greater importance to those indefinable intuitive abilities than to the totality of tangible statistical data which may be available to them in any situation requiring solution.

### **Work Out Your Own Style**

Still another misconception is that one must precisely duplicate someone else’s successful leadership style. This is not to say there is anything wrong with adopting a role model. Accepting or adapting a role model, though possibly beneficial, is not a solution to all circumstances. The belief that what worked for one person will work for another simply is not always true. Most experienced chief executives have watched subordinates mimic their style, often leading to their own disillusionment and confusion in its failure to produce success for them. The important thing the aspiring executive must do is judge, within the context of any leadership style or model, what will work or not work for him or her.

No two human beings are completely alike. Accordingly, two people may or may not behave essentially the same way in similar situations. The aspiring leader, or for that matter, the person at the top who has notions of staying there, will

want to adapt and modify the successful styles of other leaders, then integrate them into his own operational style.

### **Popularity and Fear**

A final misconception about becoming a senior executive that should not be omitted is the belief that it is better to be popular than feared. Popularity is important in any organization for the part it plays in maintaining high morale among employees, a concern of any conscientious CEO. It is more important, however, to be successful.

It's normal for top individuals to try to jockey themselves into positions where they can maintain maximum popularity among one-half plus one of the individuals who work for them. The ideal is to be both popular and competent at the same time. In the long run, a chief executive is more likely to be judged on the substance of decisions rather than on who likes him. Popularity does not necessarily get the job done.

Outside the organization, among one's peers, popularity leads to both social and professional involvement. Interactions of this type may be limited if the external public perceives of one as incapable or unapproachable. Popularity allows one to build a good reputation outside the organization. If well liked, one generally will be afforded greater opportunity to do that which one wants and needs to do both, personally and professionally.

Concomitant with the idea of popularity is another issue—that of being loved versus that of being feared. It is more important for a chief executive to be feared than loved. Traditional ideology maintains that when fear can be instilled in subordinates, one can effectively control their behavior.

As much as we enjoy the concept of being motivated by love to achieve our best, Machiavelli, exercising his own style of apex thinking, observed that is rarely the case:

*Men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage, but fear preserves you by the dread of punishment which never fails.*

-Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Make no mistake that love is the higher ideal and would be the preferred method if it were properly valued and honored. History, however, substantiates that it is frequently the fear of punishment or negative conditioning that facilitates effective control of a large number of people. Is creating such a fear of losing one's job or angering the "Big Boss" the best leadership control tool? No. That is not to encourage the aspiring chief executive to incorporate a "reign of terror" into his or her evolving system of leadership style. It is simply to point out the necessity of sometimes employing fear to help subordinates recognize that they will be held accountable for their actions or lack of action.

We are in an era when one of our nation's most highly prized principles, the "work ethic," obviously is slipping away from us. It might even be more accurate to state that it is actually retreating at a break-neck pace! Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to maintain that the productive work environment is couched within a framework that does not guarantee paychecks under circumstances where individuals are not earning them.

For the aspiring chief executive, it is helpful to note that recent studies indicate that successful people generally have relatively low expectations of others. It is not that they revel in the need or ease of manipulating people at their discretion, but more that they never underrate the innate ability of others to foster problems. Consequently, they allow for this factor in all their plans! Therefore, we come back to the original query: Is it better to be loved or feared? In light of what we have just discussed, some degree of fear must be exercised. It then becomes pertinent to ask whether it is possible to be feared and loved, or at least, whether fear may necessarily incur hatred.

Can you think of any organization which has more effectively used fear throughout the ages as a control device than institutionalized religion? When considering the history of Christianity, how easily we forget or dismiss the pillaging, plundering, and rape of the Crusades, the tortures and murders of the Inquisition, and the live burnings of the witch trials in this country. In more modern times, extreme Islamic fundamentalism has driven men and women to acts of self-destruction that many continue to find incomprehensible. Regardless of numerous atrocities which have occurred in the name of God, people sustain a sense of love that empowers them to suffer tremendous sacrifices to propagate the practice of their faith as they understand it on a global scale.

Most people experience some fear of their parents in their formative years. It may be fear of punishment or fear of disapproval. Often, it is a delicate combination of both. Most come through it emotionally intact: loyal, devoted, and loving; and generally of the opinion that they are better for it, having learned something of the art of discipline.

The crucial factor lies in the essence of the spirit in which the discipline is administered. A wise executive doesn't spend a great deal of time or energy correcting or disciplining someone he regards as a "lost cause." He simply moves him out. Those who remain have his tacit vote of confidence. He can polish their potential and refine their skills often through disciplinary action, but always with the goal of increasing their specialized abilities. Many of the more effective leaders are friends but not buddies. They keep a watchful parental eye on all facets of their "family." They provide support and protection when warranted, but will also administer stiff sanctions or even dismiss the member who threatens the working integrity of the whole.

If one cannot control or accomplish the goals of an organization by gaining the respect of subordinates or peers, fear of negative consequences help serve as a viable alternative to achieve compliance. The use of fear is not necessarily a negative device when it accomplishes the goals of the organization. On the other hand, fear taken to extremes or fear leading to abuse leads to hatred. No chief executive can survive very long when he or she is hated. They can, however, survive being feared.

Fear as a leadership tool ranks second only to persuasive communication. In apex thinking, one needs to recognize its importance and place as one moves up the ladder. More and more people normally will fear, or at least maintain a healthy respect for those individuals who exercise direct control over things important to them, whether described as a job, a meal ticket, or a position that lends identity. Fear sometimes may provide the only means of gaining control—as well as of helping keep control—of an organization. And, unfortunately, it sometimes is the only motivation to which some people will respond.