By Joel Zeff

Make the Right Choice: Six Sprinkles on the Leadership Cupcake

Here is my full disclosure: I love a manager who can strut into a room wearing a crazy costume. A recent client made her way into the manager’s conference as a mermaid. I think there was even a fishing pole attached. The audience loved it. I am not sure if all of the world’s problems could be solved if our leaders were required to appear in costume. I am betting we could knock out one or two. Somehow, I just have more respect for someone when they present as a mermaid.

As you read this, there are two possible reactions: “Yeah, I once dressed as a Roman General/race car driver/disco dancer/Barney/Austin Powers/Saturday Night Live character to open a conference/inspire the team/give out awards/wish someone a happy birthday and it was awesome/electric/inspiring/hilarious.”

Or your reaction could be: “I don’t do costumes.”

If your reaction is the latter, you probably aren’t going to like my six observations of great leadership. I admit that costumes are silly. To me, a little silly can inspire respect, passion and success. The world could use a little silly. And my guess is that your office could use a little silly.

Leadership books are like finding a penny on the ground. They are everywhere and most of us have stopped picking them up and just keep walking. Sure, business books cover all the elements of great, serious leadership. What about some of the things the books don’t cover? What about the sprinkles on the cupcake? One of my favorite clients (and a regional vice president of a large company) always told me you can’t forget about the sprinkles on the cupcake.

Maybe it is time to pick up the penny again, but look at it differently. I have spoken to around 1,500 different organizations. Luckily, I have the chance to meet hundreds (maybe thousands) of corporate presidents, vice presidents, CEOs, and every kind of manager. I observe and watch. Through the years, I have seen good and not so good leaders.

Recently, a group of managers decided to read my book and discuss each chapter in a leadership book club. They asked if I could call in and discuss leadership and the book. I was honored and a little surprised they had chosen my little book. I called in and we had a wonderful conversation. Through our discussion, I was asked, “What makes a great leader?”

Let’s take a chance and pick up the penny. Here are my six observations that allow leaders to be successful. They are my sprinkles on the cupcake. I promise you don’t have to dress as a mermaid.

1. **Engage and Participate.** I encounter all kinds of managers when I speak to various groups and organizations. I was asked to speak to a small group of managers. The person giving my introduction hadn’t even finished before the company president walked out the door. The person giving my introduction, part of the leadership team, also didn’t stay for my presentation. What do you think this says to the group of managers?

   A. “I know everything so there is no reason to listen to the person I hired to speak to you.”
   B. “I am better than everyone in the room.”
   C. “My time is more valuable.”
   D. “I don’t interact with the ‘lower’ managers.”
E. “I want to be first in line for the deli lunch boxes.”

These thoughts may or may not be true. I have no doubt everyone in the room thought at least one of them. There is nothing that frustrates me more than a leader that doesn’t participate. If you expect your team to experience it, then you, as their leader, should also participate. Engage with your team. Participate in every activity, even the ones that are silly. You might learn something. You will also gain valuable respect from your team. I think great leaders stand beside their team when they lead. They are part of the team, not separate from the team. You will always lose more by not participating.

2. **Admit Mistakes.** During my discussion with the book club, one of the leaders mentioned she had two small teams. She invited one team (five people) for a discussion followed by lunch. She didn’t invite the other team (two people). Each team does separate jobs so she thought the small team wouldn’t be interested. She asked my opinion.

   To me, great leadership is about inclusiveness and finding common ground. Great leaders bring people together and find commonalities. We can always learn from each other. I think she should have at least given the small team the option to attend. Let’s not forget, there was a free lunch involved.

   As we talked through everything, the manager realized she had made a mistake. Her plan was to admit her mistake and plan more opportunities for the two teams to interact and learn from each other.

   Yes, it hard to admit our mistakes. We all make them. The great leaders admit their mistakes and find a way to correct them.

3. **Ask Questions.** We all want opportunity in our jobs. And opportunity is different for all of us. We could want more responsibility, customer interaction, travel, training, or the opportunity to present ideas. Some of us are very good about raising our hands and asking for opportunity. Some are not. As leaders, we have to ask our team what opportunity they need to be happy. You will be surprised by the answer because it is not more money. That happiness only lasts until the next paycheck and then we are right back at the beginning, looking for something else.

   You will be surprised by the answer. And you will also be surprised by how easy it is to give that opportunity to your team member. The best part is the employee becomes more energized and passionate. The result to that passion is always success. Ask your team one question: What opportunity do you need to be happy? And then ask the question: What can I do to make the people around me more successful? Find the answers and act on them.

4. **Avoid trying to make everyone happy.** Sometimes a new client will explain they have a few malcontents in their company. They never like anything new. They are cynical. They have a bad attitude. I have heard it all. They then ask me, “What am I going to do to engage the malcontents?” I have a simple plan: I could care less. They are not my problem. They are your problem because you hired
them. Companies and leaders spend too much time, money and effort trying to make everyone happy. It is not going to happen. Think of the classic bell curve. There are three groups:

A. The beginning of the curve. These people are your stars. If you walked in and said we were only eating carrots for lunch this week, they would clap their hands, jump up and shout, “Carrots. I love carrots.”

B. The middle part of the curve. This is the big part of the curve or bell. These employees can go either way. They want to be led. They want to be motivated and inspired to be successful.

C. The end of the curve is where the malcontents live. I call them “Bye-Bye” people. They don’t care about goals or making the customer (internal or external) happy. Mentally, they are gone. They are “Bye-Bye”. They are not happy. And nothing is really going to make them happy.

Spend your time rewarding and appreciating the stars; and motivating and inspiring the team in the bell curve. Engage the “Bye-Bye” people. You have to at least give them a chance. Hopefully, they will participate and help the team create success. If they don’t make the choice, then it might be time for them to find opportunity and happiness at another company.

5. **Communicate.** During the leadership book club, one of the managers mentioned that there was a huge change in her team. A key leader was leaving. Her team was worried because of impending change. What should she do?

We discussed three steps:

A. Always communicate what is happening. If you don’t fill the space with news, they will fill it with rumor. And the rumor and conjecture they create will always be negative. That is just how it works. Communicate what is happening and the next steps in the process of finding a new manager. Fill the void with positive and correct information.

B. During the transition, make sure you communicate your appreciation and support for their hard work and passion. Positive support is a gift. And it doesn’t take a budget. It just takes a few seconds.

C. Reward the employees who have taken on more work and filled the gaps during the transition. Surprise them with a coffee run. Give everyone a birthday card on the same day (even if it is not their birthday). Take the team to lunch. Just tell them you how much they are appreciated.

6. **Laugh and have fun.** Yep, we have circled back to dressing up as a mermaid. In reality, you don’t have to wear a silly costume. Just open up a little more. Be a part of the fun and games. Find ways to laugh with your team. Laughter is our great common denominator. It humanizes us.

Every time I bring the “big boss” on stage to participate in an exercise with me, the audience goes wild. They love it. After the presentation, everyone talks about the “big boss” participating and having fun. It is amazing the respect and admiration they gain by stepping out of their comfort zone.
There is nothing that bonds and connects people like laughter. If you show me a leader with humility and that can laugh at themselves, I know they are a respected and admired.

Those are my six sprinkles on the cupcake. I hope they help you become a better leader and avoid some of the pitfalls. I always fall back on my favorite message: you have to stay in the game. Look up any great leader in history. Their story is sure to be filled with challenges, mistakes and obstacles. The difference is that the great leaders didn’t give up. They stayed in the game. They learned something new. They worked harder. They got out of their comfort zone. And some of them even dressed up like a mermaid.

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