

“A must-read for all leaders and those who motivate teams.”

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LEADING IN REAL TIME

How to Drive
Success in
a Radically
Changing World



MICHELLE RAY

THE REAL-TIME LEADER

“Are you responding to the now or reacting to your past?”

RAMANA PEMMARAJU

LEADERS WILL always need to evolve and adapt without losing sight of what is right in front of them. But if today’s leaders aren’t prepared to lead and think differently about the world of work, they will fall behind. Not only do they need to expand their thinking around leadership, but they must be ready to lead in real time, whether that time is during a pandemic, generational change in the workforce, or fast-moving technological change. The future of leadership is being sculpted by employees and customers in a radically changing world. Leading in real time is what makes a leader future-ready, allowing them to better understand the expectations and aspirations of their employees and their customers.

Leaders who work in real time are doing what is needed to move the business strategy forward: they take care of their talent and make time for their people no matter what. They

express a willingness to adapt to change in the customer arena while remaining cognizant of global events, such as the rise of employee activism, the influences of AI, and digital disruption. They are leaders like Frank Palmer.

I met Frank Palmer several years ago when he hired me to present to a group of advertising agency owners at their annual conference in Vancouver. Frank is an icon in his industry, renowned for growing Palmer Jarvis, one of the most successful agencies in North America, that was subsequently bought out by one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, the Omnicom Group. Through the merger, Frank was appointed the chairman and CEO of DDB Canada, a division of Omnicom. Frank had built his business from scratch, recruiting brilliant creative teams that were lauded for their work on many memorable, innovative advertising campaigns over the span of five decades. He is highly respected by his peers and clients as a maverick, a rule breaker, and relationship-builder. For Frank, a handshake remains the greatest bond of trust. His staff, clients, colleagues, and competitors alike greatly admire his passion and total commitment to people.

Frank believes that his industry, like numerous others, will continue to evolve. However, Frank is certain that big business must shift in order to survive. When he became part of a multinational corporation, Frank witnessed several trends that caused him to rethink his own career. Specifically, he experienced a lack of cooperation on the part of ownership regarding the need to take risks and reevaluate the benefits of working with independents on a greater scale. He made the decision in early 2019 to leave DDB for several reasons. Chief among them was his innate yearning to “get out of the prison,” return to his entrepreneurial roots, and fully recapture his “*joie de vivre*.” Frank believes that we are in the “age of

the independent,” explaining, “When you have an owner who wants to run a business the same way that he or she did in the last fifty years, you are going to fail. It’s just a matter of time as the boat keeps taking on water. It’s like the *Titanic* where we rearrange the deck chairs thinking things are the same.”

It is difficult not to like Frank. He is a straight shooter who tells you what he thinks and inspires those around him to reach for the stars. For anyone who aspires to start their own enterprise, he believes that there has never been a better time than the present. What sets Frank apart from many leaders is his unshakable faith in himself and his capacity to embrace change. He is a nonconformist who recognizes that technology has made it possible for almost anyone to build their own brand and to be unafraid of revealing their talents in order to capitalize on opportunities.

In June 2020, Frank made the ad industry headlines again when he returned to DDB. I was curious to know what changed his mind and decided to ask him directly. He told me, not unsurprisingly, that he renewed the relationship with the agency on his own terms. Initially, he had received a call from Chuck Brymer, chairman of DDB Worldwide, asking him to come back “because we never should have let you go.” Frank said that he would get back to him in a few days. When Chuck asked him why delay, he told him “you can’t fix something that is already broken . . . when there is a lack of willingness to change. Let me think about it.”

Several days later Frank made Chuck an offer: Frank would function as the company’s local DDB office in Vancouver (where he lives) and pay the corporation a rights fee to do so. They agreed. Frank now has access to their brain trust, colleagues, industry research, and new business opportunities, but maintains his autonomy by having established a new

entity, with his long-time friend and business partner, Bob Stamnes, known as Palmer Stamnes DDB.

FRANK EXEMPLIFIES all the traits of what I call a *real-time leader*: a leader who can adjust on the fly and coexist with an ever-changing workplace landscape that demands open-mindedness. He made a real-time decision to seize the moment, trust his gut, and create a situation that is beneficial for multiple parties. His energy and passion for people are magnetic. And his ongoing success is primarily due to his ability to recognize new realities while prioritizing the needs of his business, team, and clients.

Frank's repertoire of leadership skills will never become obsolete regardless of shifting demographics or digitization. The pace of technological change necessitates a fluid, flexible approach, a shift in thinking, and a readiness on the part of leaders to be the catalyst for ongoing transformation of their organizations. To meet the challenge, leaders need to be prepared to undertake an honest appraisal of their individual style by asking themselves whether they are effectively setting the vision for future success.

As the expectations of your workforce and of your customers evolve, it's the leader's responsibility to challenge the status quo, take the lead, and inspire employees to transcend self-imposed boundaries, both personal and organizational, to adapt and embrace new realities. The real-time leader raises the bar for all by employing a charismatic, daring, and open style.

A leader's capacity to project confidence and belief in others is showcased by their commitment to take a particular course of action and successfully motivate their team to come on board with that action. This singular outcome remains a fundamental aspect of successful leadership, no matter how

many employees are under your watch. But the degree to which a leader is able to ignite a desire in their people to willingly change is directly related to the leader's strength of character, insight, awareness, and business savvy.

You can never diminish the influence and impact of great leadership throughout history. Outstanding leaders who inspire, motivate, flex, connect, collaborate, and remain open-minded are invaluable in the eyes of their workforces and key stakeholders. Current and future leaders who are keenly aware of their leadership responsibilities as well as business and economic realities will be poised for ongoing success. Leadership wisdom is evident among both tenured and newer leaders, but their success is not based upon age or years of experience. Rather, it is based on the lens that great leaders use to view the world.

The Challenge to Leadership

Since the dawn of time, leaders have been always ultimately responsible and accountable for the success or failure of their organizations. The old adage "it starts at the top" hasn't lost its relevance. However, the view from the top now looks vastly different, and astute leaders are constantly redesigning their systems and approaches accordingly.

The younger members of today's workforce see themselves as leaders, collaborators, change agents, and difference-makers who seek to create their own future. They want greater accountability from leaders and have clear values regarding causes that matter to them in anticipation of a bright future for themselves and the generations that follow.

Gone are the days of the autocratic leadership style. "Control freak" leaders find it difficult to accept that the workforce

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expects transparency, parity, and genuine connection. If leaders persist and expect teams to be mere followers, they will fail because employees want to be on a level playing field. They want to be seen as your equal and for you to be a real-time leader, not a “boss.”

Throughout the course of my career, numerous leaders have lamented that younger generations are impatient and entitled. Interestingly, I haven’t heard many say the same about their *own* journeys. Truth be told, there are leaders who feel that a leadership role was simply a given based on the efforts they made to climb the ladder. Or they may believe they were born to lead and their innate skills are sufficient for future success. However, you may be a leader who is discovering that your leadership journey has taken unexpected twists and turns. Accepting that you don’t have all the answers may be unfamiliar, but it may need to become your new refrain.

Eric Hoffer, an American writer on social and political philosophy, once said, “In a world of change, the learners shall inherit the earth, while the learned shall find themselves perfectly suited for a world that no longer exists.” Hoffer’s timeless reflections and future predictions have indeed come true. If you want continued success as a leader, are you ready to embrace new standards and envision yourself as an eager student? Although a number of essential skills engrained early on in your leadership career will always be useful (see Chapter 3), you will likely find that what you thought you knew about leadership is never enough.

The biggest risk to organizations of every description is surprisingly easy to identify. But shockingly, many leaders would not recognize the major elephant in the room, whether that room happens to be the C-suite, the factory floor, a job interview room, a training facility, or a conference hall. If you were to ask leaders at all levels, “What issues are you focusing

on to lead your organization successfully into the future?" the most obvious responses would likely include the following:

- Embracing change as the key to our survival.
- Acquiring the best and brightest talent to provide us with a competitive advantage.
- Budgeting for ongoing technological evolution and transformation while preparing our entire workforce with appropriate learning opportunities.

But I will tell you now that the number one reason that will derail every effort to successfully address these issues is a *fixed mindset*. When it comes to the failure of leadership nowadays, the key cause and challenge are pervading attitudes of intransigence, either conscious or unconscious. Sadly, it is mainly leaders who fail to address the urgent need to remove this critical roadblock.

If leaders want to mitigate the path to irrelevance or possible extinction, then harnessing broad-mindedness must take on a sense of urgency. Ignorance may be bliss, but it will eventually kill your business. To determine if you are perceived as broad-minded, ask any member of your workforce whether they see you as a leader who is open to hearing solutions or accepting new ideas. Or engage your people in 360-degree feedback that reveals your true biases regarding ageism (at either end of the spectrum), sexism, racial bias, and the list goes on.

Renowned research firms including Deloitte¹ and Gallup² have consistently demonstrated over four decades that a leader's values and actions play a significant role in determining whether talent are attracted to an employer. Despite all the evidence, numerous incidences of biases (recall Chelsea in the introduction) continue to be a major turnoff for many

gifted individuals who have the potential to help your organization transform, transcend challenges, and remain economically viable.

Today's successful leaders leave their egos at the door and respect employees who may not just be younger but smarter, regardless of tenure or gender. This generational shift doesn't diminish the value of long-term employees who have contributed greatly to the success of a business. Great leaders place high value on contribution, loyalty, and experience, but real-time leaders recognize that the future workforce views leadership differently and they are willing to flow with change.

Eight Signs of a Real-Time Leader

So now that you know what the challenge to leadership is, how do you recognize a real-time leader in your organization?

As we saw with Frank's story, it is absolutely possible for a real-time leader to focus on both their people and their business. Real-time leaders must ensure that they make themselves available to their workforce, remaining attuned to their concerns, personal priorities, and business perspectives. They recognize that their words and actions have an immediate and long-term impact. Real-time leaders understand that their employees' priorities coexist with the needs of the organization, that both are vying for their personal attention.

The real-time leader demonstrates eight key traits that serve them well in their leadership role; the real-time leader is:

- 1 transformative
- 2 emotionally intelligent
- 3 open-minded
- 4 humble

- 5 exceptional at listening
- 6 optimistic
- 7 consistent and trustworthy
- 8 authentic

1. Transformative

Leaders who are transformative possess the capacity to truthfully assess their attitudes and behaviors. The capacity to lead into the future requires a heightened self-consciousness and an acute awareness of real-time events that are influencing business and the world of work (see Chapter 3).

In an overview of the 2020 Future of Leadership Global Executive Study and Research Report,³ the authors note, “Today’s trailblazing leaders increasingly recognize that in order to credibly transform their organizations, they must credibly transform themselves and their teams.” The report identifies the behavioral traits of leaders that engage, inspire, and motivate the new workforce, as well as those traits that “erode” relationships and organizational culture. The latter traits include rigid top-down approaches that are still prevalent and that impede talent development at all levels. Real-time leaders who employ new behaviors with minimal delay and eliminate practices that impede the path to progress are poised to transform the challenges of navigating the future for themselves and their organizations.

The transformative leader intuitively understands when it is time to rethink and reevaluate their own approach. A leader’s willingness to evolve with the times and stay in sync with the workforce, while giving them the freedom to thrive, exemplifies transformational leadership in action. Real-time leaders aren’t invested in getting their teams to conform.

Rather, they embolden employees by providing support, while giving them room to create and collaborate.

2. Emotionally Intelligent

A leader's emotional intelligence, also known as the emotional quotient (EQ), has a profound impact on morale, productivity, and employee motivation. If you are in a leadership position, emotional intelligence is a prerequisite more than ever. Daniel Goleman's groundbreaking research⁴ on the subject determined that a leader's emotional quotient accounted for 67 percent of the abilities necessary for superior leadership performance.

Human interaction is complicated, and even more so in the digital world. Individuals react differently to verbal and nonverbal cues and bring their respective histories, personal and professional, conscious and unconscious, into every social encounter. When addressing a team or an employee one-on-one, a leader who is cognizant of their words and actions, as well as how recipients interpret them, has likely honed their capacity for demonstrating empathy and self-awareness—these are essential skills that directly impact a leader's individual and team relationships. The importance of building trust and rapport in any work environment cannot be understated. In the grand scheme of things, a leader's emotional intelligence has a significant impact on shaping an organization's culture and its future.

3. Open-Minded

To lead effectively into the future, it's essential to acknowledge the talents of the people in your workforce that can propel your business vision forward. To do that, you need to sidestep your

own biases. The degree to which an individual demonstrates receptivity toward new ideas indicates the difference between transactional and transformational leaders. A transactional leader may possess strong business acumen, a caring disposition, passion for their work, and strong organizational skills to manage the day-to-day needs of the organization. However, these characteristics don't necessarily mean that they are able to hear and receive suggestions regarding different approaches favorably or openly. Conversely, a transformational leader can transcend their own shortcomings and prejudices in order to recognize the value of ideas emanating from every level. Phoebe Dodds, a Gen Z entrepreneur based in Europe, and founder of content strategy company Buro155, described the need to maintain an open mind as follows:

Don't discount the opinions of the lowest people in your company. Those are the ones who are closest to the source and are most likely to be forgotten. When I was an intern, decisions were made by cliques at the top. I prefer the idea of vertical integration, buddying systems within hierarchical structures, rather than people only talking to those who are at their level. This gives leaders the clearest image of what is happening in their business and how people feel. With all the options available, it's becoming less enticing for people to actually work in a company with hundreds of employees. Leaders need to be cognizant of these realities, otherwise they are not going to be able to retain top talent.

4. Humble

Practicing humility comes easily for leaders who are willing to admit they don't have all the answers or they have made a mistake. When a leader can accept that it is perfectly natural to be

imperfect and detach from an ego-driven reaction in such circumstances, they become more approachable, likable—human! Many leaders consider humility to be a sign of weakness; however, in the eyes of their team, it is a highly attractive trait as it builds trust and an opportunity for greater connection.

There is a simple explanation for the lack of humility in leaders. The common paradigm of leadership in the past was based on a title, or holding a position of power that denotes authority and control over others, leaving little room for vulnerability and self-correction. A leader who exercises humility demonstrates transparency, resulting in greater opportunities to draw others closer. When challenging times arise, employees look to their leaders to act with sensitivity and to adopt an unpretentious style. This is especially crucial when organizational change is imminent and buy-in is paramount.

5. Exceptional at Listening

Listening and hearing are two critically different things, and there's nothing more off-putting than a leader who lacks the capacity to listen. A perceptive leader pays attention, talks less, and listens more. Interestingly, this opens up the door to some who may share a viewpoint that is entirely different from yours. In these situations, great listeners do not react. They recognize and acknowledge, either verbally or through positive nonverbal cues, that they have heard the other person. For example, you may reply, "Tell me more about your perspective," or "I would like to understand more about your point of view," even if you disagree. Respond by repeating what you heard, not sharing your reaction to what they said, and do this with genuine interest.

The concept of listening to understand, rather than to refute, as well as knowing the difference between hearing and

listening benefits the real-time leader. It will serve you well when you need to respond quickly or make instantaneous decisions. Your capacity to genuinely listen is an attractive trait that goes a long way to bolstering your authenticity and credibility as a leader. It's worthwhile keeping in mind that the same letters that are in the word *listen* are also in the word *silent*.

6. Optimistic

To suggest that an effective leader should be positive, upbeat, and optimistic might sound like an oversimplification. Nonetheless, it is important to reiterate the benefits. It is hard to imagine any team being inspired by a pessimist; a leader's positive persona is magnetic and critical for setting the tone in any work environment.

Brad Eshleman, former president, Western Stevedoring Group of Companies (now rebranded as Western Group), exudes confidence and positivity. Brad has tremendous responsibilities as the leader of a multibillion dollar enterprise that plays a significant role in the global transportation supply chain, yet he is fully present during every encounter. He is enthusiastic about his team, his company, and the future. His opening remarks during one of his company's leadership sessions that I attended immediately set the tone for a bright meeting and a bright future. He tempered realism with enthusiasm brilliantly while providing his "state of the nation" report. And he articulated his vision in a manner that generated ongoing excitement throughout the course of the day. His optimism and genuine approachability are traits that will always be well received by managers and teams alike. It was easy to understand why his team of senior leaders, or anyone who has the good fortune to connect with him, would immediately be drawn to his personality.

7. Consistent and Trustworthy

If you have worked with a leader who genuinely gets to know their people, sets and holds the standards, and follows through in their communication, you are fortunate. Empirical research in many sectors of industry confirms that consistent actions and behaviors on the part of leaders earn the respect and trust of individuals and teams alike. Yet a YPO Global Pulse survey released in January 2020⁵ confirms the organizational ramifications of a persistent trust gap. The findings also show that leaders at the highest level find it challenging to build trust with teams and stakeholders, with the majority lacking a strategy to address the issue.

Although many leaders understand the strong correlation between how their teams perceive them and the impact of being a person of their word, they are still falling short. When a leader's attitudes and follow-through are inconsistent, they may become the weakest link—they are the problem instead of the solution. Without clarity and consistency, a leader's reputation is negatively impacted. The absence of clear and thoughtful communication has far-reaching consequences. Such actions slowly erode trust, morale, and engagement. Although there is no doubt that leaders feel the burden of internal and external pressures, responsibilities, and time constraints, attending to such fundamentals as getting to know their people and demonstrating genuine consideration for their needs goes a long way to achieving key business goals.

8. Authentic

Although strategic thinking and decision-making capabilities are essential leadership traits, the skills associated with the human side of leading others are equally if not more

important. In times of constant flux, people need reassurance from their leaders. This is when a leader's ability to be relatable, authentic, and an outstanding communicator is key. Individual employees and teams need to know that leaders have the capacity to listen, to demonstrate genuine understanding regarding employees' fears or concerns. When they communicate authentically, leaders are able to connect with their teams on a deeper level and appreciate different points of view. By developing a greater understanding of others, they contribute to a collaborative space, enjoy the camaraderie of their colleagues, and sustain passion for their chosen vocation.

PEOPLE HAVE always looked to their leaders for certainty, support, and encouragement. These needs have become even more amplified during times of flux and anxiety, as leaders are called upon to step up as positive role models who can respond and draw upon firsthand experiences. By demonstrating these eight signs of a real-time leader, you can position yourself as helpful, genuine, available, and ready to adapt to new realities.

Real-Time Takeaways

- The number one challenge for real-time leaders is maintaining an open mindset.
- Lead with a willingness to adapt and change course quickly, accounting for the unexpected.
- Raise your level of awareness regarding real-time change that is happening internally and externally to better prepare yourself and your organization for new realities.

- Leaders who prioritize honing their people-building skills are better equipped during times of crisis and uncertainty. Your workforce wants to know that they can trust and connect with you.

Real-Time Action Step

Choose one of the eight real-time leader traits weekly for the next eight weeks and place it on your daily calendar. This visual reminder will bring the trait into your conscious awareness as soon as you review your daily schedule. Look for opportunities to practice that specific characteristic in real time.