

Three Habits of *Excellent* Leadership

By Aubrey Warren

One of the 'prizes' I enjoy awarding at the end of workshops is a desk plaque with the words of Aristotle: 'We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit'.

All of us have habits. Some good, some not so good. Some of our habits help us achieve, experience, and model excellence. Some of our habits hold us back from excellence. And, of course, in a leadership context our habits have amplified effects on those we work with—encouraging or inhibiting excellence in teams, processes, productivity, innovation, and communication.

So what might be some practical, everyday habits of excellent leadership?

1. Powerful conversations that challenge, focus, support, and encourage



Our everyday conversations, both formal and informal, are central to our effectiveness in influencing others. So, the ability to engage in conversations that produce positive results is a key leadership habit. Every interaction produces a result—good, bad, or indifferent. Every conversation creates or reinforces others' perception of us. Every conversation is thus important and therefore worth managing. What do you want your conversations to

achieve? Sometimes you need to challenge people, processes, or priorities. Sometimes you need to focus or refocus individuals or teams. Sometimes a conversation needs to clearly communicate support. And sometimes (often) our conversations should encourage.

2. Attentive listening that invites input and enables insight

It could be argued that listening is obviously part of conversations, but it's also such an important behavioural habit that it deserves its own space. Listening is called 'the neglected communication' skill, which suggests it may not be as habitual



as we'd like to think. Active listening is first a choice. Attentive listening takes time and effort, but it rewards us with richer information (think about the quality of information you choose to give to those who listen attentively). It produces greater clarity. It also communicates respect.

3. Modeling and reinforcing the right values

Everyone says they 'lead by example'. And of course we do—we can't help it because people observe our behaviour and create impressions based on that behaviour far more readily and powerfully than they do in response to our words. (And, of course, our intentions are completely unknown to them.) The only question

about leading by example is what that example is. Fundamentally a leader's responsibility is to exemplify the values and standards that are the team's and organisation's aspirations. After all, the values should be reflected in our habitual behaviour. A



leader's conversations should also reinforce the practice of positive values. (This is also a practical way of having supportive conversations.)

These three apparently simple daily habits are individually and collectively at the heart of a group, team, or organisation's culture. As Edgar Schein wrote: '...there is a possibility...that the only thing of real importance leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with cultures'.

Culture is largely the creation of habits. So the question is simply which habits we want to shape our culture. And if we want an 'excellent' culture, it makes sense to cultivate and celebrate excellent habits.

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