Reality-Based Leadership

_Ditch the Drama, Restore Sanity to the Workplace, and Turn Excuses into Results_

by Cy Wakeman

Get Real

A Commonsense Approach to Leadership

QUICK OVERVIEW

_Reality-Based Leadership_ speaks specifically to results-focused leaders. Those who are more interested in a softer, more people-focused style of management may cringe at the idea of “playing favorites” by rewarding producers, but it’s a philosophy that, according to author Cy Wakeman, is both efficient and effective. She unapologetically challenges traditional HR practices and even claims they’re counterproductive. However, her in-your-face approach doesn’t diminish some of her startlingly true (and daily overlooked) facts.

With plenty of subheads, bullet points and lists, the book is an easy read that packs a punch. Wakeman’s personality and willingness to counter traditional business thinking make it an engaging and insightful study of what causes stress in the workplace, and how to alleviate it. Some of what Wakeman says will be music to the ears of leaders who are frustrated by employees with an “entitlement” attitude. Additionally, she encourages readers to forgo “managing” for the more effective task of “leading.”

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

Reality-Based Leadership is about dealing with the here-and-now challenging circumstances we all face. Wakeman recommends having a neutral, prepared, almost-automatic verbal reply that allows you to take time to plan your response. This verbal reply can be a simple, “Good to know”—truthful, without allowing any doubt, fear or even excitement to escape before you’ve had a chance to weigh your response and gauge your team’s reaction.

Wakeman also suggests that as you formulate your response to be aware of any tendency to become over-the-top or dramatic. She points out that even what some would consider a positive response, such as, “We can do it; it’s us against the world!” can be melodramatic, encouraging a victim mentality in your team members who are prone to that.

SUCCESS Points

_In this book you’ll learn why:_

- Team buy-in shouldn’t be optional
- Some opinions matter more than others
- There are no foolproof plans
- Results are more important than being right
- Eliminating “circumstances” as an excuse is empowering
Instead, as you pause to formulate your response, focus on the positive and avoid drama, “We can do it! Here’s why…” What could your response be to a team member who informs you that they’re going to miss a deadline or event?

If you have been promoted to a position of leadership in your company, chances are you have long since proven yourself as a manager. You’re a whiz at solving problems, deciphering the spreadsheets, and balancing the budget. You know where to go to get the resources you need and how to ask for them in a way that gets the order signed. These are all critical competencies, but they do not prepare you to lead. In fact, they can get in the way of your becoming a Reality-Based Leader.

This idea is counterintuitive—even irritating—to some people the first time they hear it. Some of the executives I coach have never considered that there is a difference between managing and leading, much less that there are certain kinds of work that you have to delegate to become a great leader. I have had many clients expound on the philosophy that no task should be beneath anyone in their organization—that the leader should not ask anyone else to do that which he is unwilling or unable to do himself. I couldn’t agree more; as a leader, you shouldn’t delegate believing anything is “beneath” you. But you do need to set priorities and determine the best use of your talents and your company’s resources.

Much of the insanity that takes place in most workplaces every day is due to a lack of leadership, plain and simple. Too many leaders hide behind their proficiency at logistics and dealing with complexity—the small picture—and hope that somehow the overall vision—the big picture—will fall into place. But I promise you, this is not going to happen by accident. You have to put down the spreadsheet and learn to lead first, manage second.

The difference between management and leadership is that management is working on your business, and leadership is working on your people.

Leadership is about winning hearts and minds and consistently calling employees up to greatness by insisting on—and investing in—their growth and development. Leadership is working on the overall willingness, morale, and capacities of employees rather than micromanaging and becoming over-involved in their daily activities.

If you’ve ever watched five-year-olds play soccer, the “huddle ball” effect is very similar on a team in which the leader is over-managing and under-leading: too many players out of their zones, all trying to bring the ball up the field at the expense of the ultimate goal.

Do you get interrupted every 20 minutes throughout your day with questions that employees could answer themselves with a little bit of effort? If you drop everything and answer them… you are managing, not leading.

OVER-MANAGING AND UNDER-LEADING

How exactly might over-managing and under-leading manifest in your office? Think back to the last time your organization went through a change and you needed everyone to pull together. When people learned about the change, did they race off to their desks, and look industrious for a while, only to return to you with a laundry list of the extras—time, money, people, and other resources—they needed in order to make it happen? If so, they see you as a manager, not a leader.

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Have you ever had to put an important client on the back burner to deal with an in-house crisis? If so, you are definitely still managing, not leading.

Are you able to go on vacation without fielding “emergency” calls from the office? If not, bad sign. (On some level, though, doesn’t it make you feel good to be needed? If so, that’s an even worse sign!)

All of these are situations in which people come to you with problems they expect you to solve for them. Often, in
difficult times, our first impulse is to try to perfect people's circumstances by providing resources, answers, solutions, or just our reassuring presence.

We often try to manage our way out of difficulties—which effectively leaves our people behind—when we should be leading the way out in such a way that they feel supported, involved, and have the opportunity to learn from their challenges.

I’ll let you in on a secret all Reality-Based Leaders know: The more you provide, the more people will need, and the less satisfied they will be with what you offer. It may feel good to play the benevolent boss or indispensable colleague, but trying to perfect people’s circumstances is not the way to do it, because people gain nothing from being managed in that way. You risk robbing them of their sense of engagement and personal responsibility (which is also the source of all motivation and happiness).

Your competence, which has gotten you so far, will become their excuse not to progress. You can—and should—learn other ways of being benevolent and indispensable.

A leader’s primary job is to manage resources, and it is highly likely that the only resource in your budget with unused or untapped potential—indeed the only upside to be had in most businesses today—is the talent and energy of your employees.

Reality-Based Leaders continually work to make use of every bit of that potential, helping people to harness the energy they would normally expend on drama and redirect it toward activities that have the greatest possible positive impact in the organization.

Reality-Based Leaders help people to change their mindsets, knowing that beliefs—not circumstances—are the greatest predictor of results. Offer people a compelling purpose and a new perspective instead of easy answers. If you habitually interrupt the patterns of thought that are holding people back, they will ultimately learn to solve their own problems autonomously and to succeed in spite of their circumstances. That is the mark of a healthy individual and a healthy organization.

**SIX PRINCIPLES FOR LEADING FIRST, MANAGING SECOND**

When working with clients, I have identified six principles that help them learn to lead first and manage second. Each is aligned with a coaching technique that engages people and develops their sense of personal responsibility and independence. My method allows you to create a culture of accountability by rewarding your top performers, giving more
weight to their suggestions than you do to those with a mindset of resistance or learned helplessness. Here are the six principles for leading first and managing second:

1. Resist the Urge to Add More Value
2. Coach the Person in Front of You
3. Work on Competence First, and Confidence Will Follow
4. Forget Logistics and Focus Instead on Hearts and Minds
5. Allow People to Move Fully into Their Roles
6. Disregard Any and All Attempts at Emotional Blackmail

Before you begin to apply these principles, a word of caution: In order for any of these techniques to work, those you lead must first be convinced that you truly care about them. It is your demonstrated respect and commitment that will allow them to trust you to help them reach their full potential.

EMPOWERMENT WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY IS CHAOS

A Reality-Based Leader cares about employees’ opinions in direct proportion to what they contribute to the organization. So what do we do about the traditional employee satisfaction survey?

It’s almost blasphemy to suggest that these are useless documents. They started for a good reason: to find out how to better engage employees and empower them to do their best work. The problem with surveys, as they are used in most workplaces today, is that they don’t measure accountability. Empowerment without accountability is chaos.

Traditional surveys are invitations for people to critique their reality, and, as such, they don’t yield much useful intelligence. You usually get a lot more comments about the contents of your vending machines and your parking policy than you find useful.

Without a foundation of personal accountability, all you end up with is a great list of what would need to change in order for your staff to grace you with their performance. In fact, many times you are simply surveying the victims. You tally the comments and make action plans that usually result in more work for managers and leaders: taskforces to spearhead, and things of that nature.

What are the odds of you creating, in today’s world, the perfect environment in which your employees could work? Let’s call them zero, just by general agreement. By setting up that expectation, you only set yourself up to fail.

The system is broken. The flawed assumption at the heart of the traditional employee survey is that all of the ideas and opinions you glean from these surveys are of equal value. The problem is that a certain percentage of your workers are low on personal accountability, and you only perpetuate their victim mindset by asking them to enumerate their complaints on a survey.

STOP JUDGING AND START HELPING

If you have ever contemplated sending your people on a team-building course or a costly off-site, save yourself a lot of effort by teaching them one key question instead: “How can I help?” This question, and the spirit in which it is asked, are the heart and soul of a healthy group dynamic. In most offices, both the question and the attitude are all too rare.

Work on competence first, and confidence will follow.

My go-to strategy with a team is to insist that people assign positive motives rather than negative motives to the actions of their coworkers. In essence, I invite them to give their coworkers the benefit of the doubt, helping them to redirect the energy they are tempted to spend on their stories, complaints, and defenses to more productive activities such as learning, self-mastery, innovation, and finding creative ways forward.

Reality-Based Leaders never entertain complaints about coworkers. All it does is encourage further complaint and collusion. I always tell people that the minute you start judging is the very minute you quit leading, serving, and adding value. When you’re in judgment, you are dealing with your story—not with reality.

Challenge people to find the lesson instead of judging. Rather than begrudging the fact that the universe gave them, for example, a flighty, ill-prepared or micromanaging supervisor, welcome them to their next lesson in reality, which is learning to manage up.

Figure out what the lesson is and get them busy mastering the necessary competency. If someone is struggling, it is not our role to judge. It’s our role to ask, “How can I help?” and do everything we can to add value. This focus on results will move the team forward instead of trapping it in conflict.
This brings us to another way in which people tend to judge, which doesn’t help. Researchers have identified “trust issues” as a reason for lack of results in the workplace.

1. A statistic I have seen is that employees who trust their senior management bring back 108 percent value to their shareholders, whereas employees who do not trust their senior executives only bring 66 percent back to their shareholders.

2. What the research didn’t ask is whether trust is generated by the senior executives’ actions or by the employees’ choices. Many of the current theories and seminars on “Trust in the Workplace” are based upon a flawed premise about the origins of trust.

Here’s the reality check: Trust is not something people earn; it is a choice that people make based upon their faith in their own competencies and abilities. It has little to do with the leader and everything to do with the individual team members.

“Creating trust” is a tall order for leaders and an unacceptable excuse for the lack of results in the workplace. While leaders certainly have a responsibility to act with integrity, consistency, decency, and respect, I can guarantee you every leader will stumble at times and unwittingly fail their employees at multiple points in their relationship. That’s the reality of it—they are human. If we are basing organizational profit on the perfection of our managers, it is a fragile prospect indeed.

Profits don’t come directly from higher levels of trust between leaders and employees. Profits are the result of personally accountable, bulletproof employees who make trust a conscious decision. Reality-Based Leaders make it clear that they expect this conscious act of will from their employees, and that in turn ensures profitable results.

People who trust themselves to make good choices around others and take full responsibility for their actions have a higher level of trust in others. It has nothing to do with other people and everything to do with their own decisions.

What does this have to do with your business? Everything. Trust is about your own courage and confidence, not someone else’s integrity. To adopt this new belief is to set yourself free as a leader and as an employee. While you can’t control or change the behavior of others, you can take responsibility and claim accountability for your own actions and behavior. Want to improve trust in your organization? Start there. People who trust themselves trust their leaders and the companies they work for are more profitable as a result.

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Questions to Ask When Accounting for Results

- What were your results? Did you succeed or not? (Watch out for the individual or team lowering the standard, wanting to believe that they “did pretty well considering the circumstances,” like they should get extra points for challenges.)
- What happened? (Listen for their stories. Are they closely accounting for the facts and their behavior?)
- How do you account for your results? (Listen for I, not we or they or you.)
- What did you believe?
- How did that belief affect your behavior, attitude, creativity, and choices?
- What were the facts? What did you know or what do we know for sure?
- How committed were you? How bought-in were you?
- What could you change to ensure your success in the future? (Listen to make sure that changes are in the first person, and not about having more resources, changing others, or changing their reality and circumstances.)
- What are you committing to in the future? (Have the person write it down—that is her new development plan—and then hold her to it.)
ACTION STEPS

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your business and your life. Consider the following “leadership principles” that are actually limiting beliefs. Think about each of the limiting beliefs below and consider how they may be causing problems in your business. Rewrite each statement and then make a note of one way you can adjust your leadership behavior, beginning today.

1. “Everyone’s opinion counts.”
2. “Great results can only come from perfect plans.”
3. “Accepting accountability for failures leads to a loss of credibility.”
4. “There is no ‘I’ in Team.”
5. “Don’t bring me a problem without also bringing me a solution.”
6. “There is no such thing as a stupid question.”
7. “In a downturn, it’s best to hold back and wait for clarity before you act.”

About the Author

Cy Wakeman established her entrepreneurial expertise with four successful startups. Today, she serves as a consultant to companies looking to survive and thrive in challenging financial times. She has worked and consulted in a variety of industries, including manufacturing, banking, government, technology and health care. A keynote speaker, she delivers more than 100 keynotes a year. Reality-Based Leadership is her first book, and she has written for The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Forbes and MSN. She’s also featured as an expert blogger for Fast Company.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this summary of Reality-Based Leadership, you may also want to check out:

You’re Broke Because You Want to Be by Larry Winget

The Truth About Leadership by James M. Kouzes

If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat by John Ortberg