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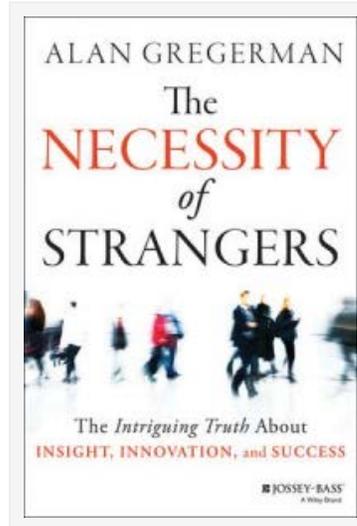


The "new" rules for leaders

By Alan Gregerman on September 17th, 2013 | [Comments \(0\)](#)

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We all know that LEADERSHIP is crucial to business success and that the best leaders help us to build organizations and cultures that nurture innovation, unlock the brilliance in employees at all levels, foster collaboration, and encourage new and more meaningful connections with customers. But does the leader's role need to change in a world filled with strangers and countless possibilities? To answer this question, let's begin with a simple children's story that has been around for about five hundred years ...



In the French version of the classic tale "Stone Soup," retold and illustrated in 1947 by award-winning author Marcia Brown, three soldiers come to a modest village on their way home from war looking for a meal and a place to sleep. Upon seeing the soldiers approaching, the village residents quickly hide all of their food. It's not that they dislike strangers, though they are somewhat suspicious of them, but rather that they are very poor and know that "soldiers are always hungry." It is a situation that makes for an enjoyable test of wits that continues to amuse kids and their parents throughout much of the world.

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As the story unfolds the soldiers enter the village and knock on the doors of several of the homes asking residents if they “could spare a bit of food” and “a corner where we could sleep for the night?” But at each house they are told that all the food is gone and that all of the beds are full. And, each family appears to have a perfectly believable reason — even though the reader has already learned that they do in fact have food which they have hidden under beds, in their cellars, and even down the well. And they also have ample room for a weary soldier to rest his head. Which leads the soldiers to devise a plan.

Standing in the center of the village, surrounded by many of its residents, they declare that since there is no food they will be forced to make stone soup—a rare and delicious concoction made primarily of water and stones. If this sounds oddly appealing to you, you are not alone. It is a most intriguing idea to a village full of hungry people. A delicious meal made from water and stones — the only two abundant resources around? It’s kind of the food equivalent to renewable energy. But first they will need the largest pot in the village, and the peasants quickly comply. Then they will need to fill it with water and light a big fire to get the water cooking. And finally they will need “three round, smooth stones.” Again the locals jump to the challenge then gather around the pot with growing curiosity.

“Any soup needs salt and pepper,” the soldiers suggest, and children quickly run off to fetch them. Then the soldiers note that while this should make a good soup it would be even better with some carrots. Before they know it, one of the women in the village returns with her apron full.

And “a good stone soup should have cabbage,” which another neighbor hurries home to find.

And, “if we only had a bit of beef and a few potatoes, this soup would be good enough for a rich man’s table.” Now that’s a request that is difficult to turn down—especially for peasants who have probably never had a rich man’s meal before. Within moments sacks of potatoes and sides of beef arrive to be stirred into the pot.

And “if we only had a little barley and a cup of milk,” the soldiers continue, “this soup would be fit for the king himself.” The soldiers then suggest that they had actually made such a soup the last time they dined with the king! Probably not the most truthful statement but exciting none the less.

Now the soup was ready and a grand table was placed and set in the village square. A table fit for a king. And as the soup smelled so good and the setting looked the grand, the villagers thought that bread, cider, and a roast might make the banquet complete. And when the final touches arrived everyone ate, and drank, and danced “far into the night,” at which time they decided that the three guests “must have the best beds in the village”—in the priest’s house, the baker’s house, and the mayor’s house. A far cry from the reception they initially received.

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The next morning the soldiers and the villagers return to the square to offer thanks and to bid each other a fond farewell and we are left to assume that the villagers now have a new understanding of their own potential to be part of something remarkable. Potential that comes to fruition when everyone’s unique contributions and abilities are brought together to achieve a bigger purpose than any one person might have achieved, or imagined, on his or her own—a delicious feast, a wonderful party, and greater openness to strangers. We are also left to wonder if the clever trio of soldiers will repeat their magic in any number of additional villages on their way home.

’The retelling of this story shows what it means to lead in a world filled with strangers and hidden possibilities. ’Below are five “new” rules for leaders They shouldn’t be surprising, but they are not the typical rules or principles we use when thinking about leadership. These new rules build on our earlier discussion of mindsets and the notion openness is the real key to greater business and organizational success—openness to our own potential, where new ideas actually come from, the value of people we don’t know, and the power of connecting in new and more deliberate ways.

The “New” Rules for Leaders

Essential roles for leaders in a world filled with strangers and possibilities. . .

1. Leaders help us to see that we can always be better at the things that really matter.
2. Leaders inspire us to be remarkable.
3. Leaders empower us to discover our greatest abilities.
4. Leaders challenge us to cast a wider net and to embrace the necessity of connecting with strangers and new ideas.
5. Leaders build cultures of conversation and possibilities.

As the story suggests, leaders provide the context for helping all of us to step out of our comfort zones and see that we can always do better, and that we have the shared ability to do something remarkable if we put our hearts, minds, and resources together. ’Assuming that your company or organization has an even more compelling purpose than the soldiers in this tale, that the soup you make is all about enabling your customers to be more successful in some compelling way. If not, that should be your starting point — being clear about a purpose that makes a compelling difference to those you have the privilege to serve.

You can do this by asking two essential questions:

- Why do we exist as an organization? And,
- If we didn’t exist tomorrow would it matter?

We can’t afford to be complacent in a world filled with great competitors, powerful purposes, and a host of new business models. Employees, customers, and potential collaborators all have choices, and we want to be the most meaningful choice in meeting their objectives. But

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we can only do this if we offer something uniquely valuable to their world — that uniquely combines a purpose and the offerings and experience to fulfill it. And the real litmus test is whether the world, or at least your world, would be greatly diminished if you decided to close your doors.

That’s why the folks at places like REI, Apple, Buckman Labs, RepairClinic.com, Khan Academy, Whole Foods, or even IKEA sleep well at night. They know that they are taking their customers to new levels of knowledge, capability, and possibilities and they happen to sell them useful stuff as part of the journey. So while your best customers might be sad if you suddenly folded your tent, would they find some other company or organization to fill the void? If so, you haven’t been valuable enough and you’ve still got some important work to do.

Needless to say, someone else could always provide us with a comfortable and clean hotel room, or create a new web portal that helps a government agency to connect with citizens, or sell us roughly the same food, or climbing gear, or web-based education, or exactly the same appliance parts, chemicals, and automobiles. But what they can’t replicate is your ability to reinvent the customer’s world in a way that truly matters.

Try to imagine ...

- Making travelers more comfortable, confident, and successful based on the specific purpose of their trip.
- Enabling the government to deliver more timely, valuable, and engaging information based on a deeper understanding of citizen needs.
- Making shoppers healthier and more knowledgeable about food, proper nutrition, and having a more stress-free lifestyle.
- Making climbers more passionate and skillful, and connecting them with other folks who shared their interest.
- Giving learners a growing base of knowledge, building learning cohort groups, and supporting their transition to additional education or work.
- Making homeowners more self-sufficient, confident, and capable of doing an ever-increasing number of repairs and upgrades.
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