



The Modern Leader© **dr. stephen r. graves**

When I was a kid, one of my heroes was Batman. I read Batman comic books until the covers fell off. Every Saturday morning I raced into the living room to watch cartoons and see Batman save Gotham City from the wickedly evil schemes of the wily Joker. Batman always beat the Joker the same way: with the “WAM! BAM! KABOW!” of his black-gloved bat fists. Batman could duke it out with the best of them...until recently.

The modern Batman suddenly found himself on the losing end of the punches. What went wrong? When it came to winning the fight of twenty first century toy merchandising, Batman needed an extreme makeover. He was unidimensional. He was a one-act show...a one-talent super hero. Batman did not have x-ray vision. He could not leap over buildings in a single bound; instead, he climbed up using a Bat Hook. He did not have super human strength. Yes, he had the Bat Cave. True, he had a cool collection of odd vehicles: the Bat Mobile, the Bat Plane, a Bat Cycle and even a side-kick named Robin, the Boy Wonder. But when the new *Batman Begins* movie was being released, Batman did not have enough diverse super powers or accessories (successories) to drive the merchandising of a new action-figure sensation. Batman needed to diversify.

Go to any Wal-Mart today and you will see how Batman morphed. Batman reinvented himself. He now has umpteen personas, each complete with its unique super hero niche: Laser-Blaster Batman, Electro-Strike Batman, Hover-Claw Batman, Roto-Blade Batman, Ninja Batman—just to name a few. Batman now has so many versions, he has a wall display section all his own. Batman survived by adding to his super hero repertoire.

Today many of us climbing the corporate ladder face the same plight as Batman. We grew up a one-talent super hero. We are good at one thing, and once upon a time that got us hired and promoted. But those days are over.

The only problem is that today's business landscape demands multifunctionality at almost every level. The *one-ball wonder* is out of a job. His resume is too lean. His capabilities are too few. The challenges he faces are too diverse. Opportunities are too unpredictable. His bag of tricks is too limited. His bandwidth of contribution to the company is too narrow to justify the high cost of keeping him. He is a super hero no longer. The conclusion is clear: his stock is in a free fall.

Today's commercial climate requires its leaders to be more than one-dimensional. It used to be that people would tell themselves, “Oh, I may not be much of a manager, but where I really excel is at the big picture of vision.” Or “True, I don't do a good job of administration, but boy can I sell.” Or “OK, so what if I am a jerk? I know how to make people get things done, don't I?” They would excuse themselves from their weaknesses by leaning on their strengths.

After more than 20 years of working closely with effective leaders, it is clear to me that singular superiority no longer gets you by like it used to. The half-life on single-dimension talent alone has run out. Just like a world-class sprinter, to win in the world of business today a number of muscles, motor skills and actions all need to be firing at the same time. There is no such thing as a winning sprinter who is strong in only one leg. Like Batman, you need a wider repertoire.

In my leadership coaching practice I often offer a CEO tour in which I guide clients on a short pilgrimage of prearranged meetings gleaning the insight of a select group of top-floor corporate leaders. I remember a young rising executive who came to me wanting to take his leadership to the next level. During our engagement I arranged a CEO tour visiting five CEO's in the Midwest in three days. Among the many questions we discussed were some around the area of hiring and motivating top-level employees. One question we posed to each of them was, "When you're looking to hire Senior Leaders, what traits are you looking for?" The picture that emerged from our various conversations was that they were not necessarily looking for that natural born genius that had an awe-inspiring talent that eclipsed all the rest. Yes they wanted talent, but just as important was a learned collective skill set. The conclusion was that often leaders need to work on rounding out their born gifting with new capacities that come through intentional focused discipline learning. In other words we all have competencies to be *discovered* and competencies to be *developed*.

Now let's be very clear. I am not advocating, nor do I believe, that anyone is omniscient. That is a myth born and perpetuated by the self-help industry. But nor can any of us afford to blindly ignore developing the areas that do not come natural to us. When it comes to skill sets we need the good and the great...not just the great.

I have observed seven double-barreled areas of skill that effective modern leaders are discovering and developing. Each couplet has two almost opposite sides. Each is kind of the yin or yang of the other. Each pair is hinged on the beauty and power of the AND, not the OR. No one is born equally capable on both sides. As I have already said, we are hard wired toward one side in each set. That is OK. However, I must make certain that I develop at least some conscious competence in the broader areas of effective leadership, even if it doesn't come natural. Sure I can staff to my weakness. But at the same time, perhaps I can go back to school and better round out my leadership skills.

As you read through this list of the seven pairs, tag which side of the tandem you are strongest in. You might also want to arrange them in order of what comes natural versus what is outside your natural wiring. You might also mark the skill sets that seem to be especially critical to your current work assignment.

1. Being Results Driven AND People Focused
2. Doing Friday's Payroll AND Inventing the Future
3. Having Heart AND Using Your Head
4. Thinking Corporately AND Working Functionally
5. Leading Others AND Managing Yourself
6. Feeling Confident AND Being Humble
7. Embracing Team AND Performing Alone

1. Being Results Driven & People Focused

Conventional wisdom is that you are either a people monster or a task-driven maniac. In truth you cannot afford to neglect either one. You may be strong in one, but you need proficiency in both. You have to execute on task. Furthermore, getting things done requires knowing how to work with others.

Thomas L. Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat*, explains the new facts of life that we must all come to terms with. In a day in which global competition is squeezing margins, delivering results against goals is an imperative of economic survival. Gone are the days when corporate payrolls had the luxury of fat workforces with departments that got anything they wanted.

A corporate job is no longer like an endowed chair with life tenure. The cost of labor is the Achilles heel of American business. It is more expensive for me as an American to do something than it is for somebody in India. That means I have to deliver more value per hour if I want to keep making a living. This new flattened world means that today every position on the org chart must justify its existence everyday.

Results are not optional if you want a paycheck next month. We all have to deliver. The company's bottom line is now your bottom line. There is no insulation from the reality of the market.

On the other hand, the severing of apron strings with the warm womb of the old way of doing business means that your relational quotient (RQ) is equally critical. Today you have to grow your RQ, because now everybody is functionally a free agent. Since people know that you are making no promises to them about the future, how you treat them today matters all the more. No matter where you are in the pecking order, you cannot get where you need to go without other stakeholders helping you make it there. You need people. The higher odds just mean that human capital is even more vital to your success. People have become their own bottom line that you neglect to your own peril. Upgrading your RQ is a practical way to grow the human capital underneath your bottom line.

Furthermore, post-boomer generations simply will not put up with the old ways. They demand a work culture where relationships and people are shown respect. Who they work with is as important to them as what they do. The same goes for customers and vendors. It is one huge symbiotic web whose links are all relational. Since price has already been squeezed to the max, the increase in competition means that decisions are increasingly made on what you are like to work with. People are asking, will doing business with you make my life easier or just bring me more headaches?

Your relational reliability will largely determine how they answer that question. Business increasingly faces the same predicament of volunteer service organizations. Today association is voluntary. People are choosing who to work with. So you have to learn to be the kind of person you need others to be for you. The Office Jerk is an endangered species. The Taskmaster must now lead with a velvet hammer. The Hatchet Man who delivers over everybody else's dead body will find the second time he comes calling that no one returns his call.

The double-edged truth is that both people and the bottom line matter. When results matter, you have to know how to get other people to help you make results happen. That requires both task focus and people proficiency.

2. Doing Friday's Payroll & Inventing the Future

There are two key horizontal elements to any enterprise: creating future opportunity and delivering on yesterday's promises. One is focused forward; the other keeps a watch on the rear end. One is about the windshield; the other is about the rear view mirror. Our tendency is to either be a visionary or to be a deliverer. Today, however, you must have functionality both inventing the future and delivering on Friday's payroll.

Tomorrow is a blank piece of paper. If you do nothing that is what it will remain: blank, with nothing on it. It has to be written. You have to create your own opportunities. You have to be constantly reinventing the future, for yourself and your company. Evolve or die. It is that simple. In today's world, success is like bread. It has a limited shelf-life. You have to always be making the next new batch.

Those who most need to work on the discipline of inventing the future are those who are operational implementers. If you are strong on consistent administration and operational maintenance, I will bet good money that your future vision is under developed. Engineering your future is a discipline. It requires regular time invested in thinking ahead. How old is your five-year plan? If it is more than a year old, then you are already behind on the future.

Give yourself a future check up.

- What are my job's and my company's opportunities for growth in the next six months, year and five years? What are our greatest exposures to risk?
- If we saw success in those opportunities, what would we need to deliver on results? If any of our worst nightmare scenarios came true, what would our options be?
- What is my (our) greatest strength? How could we better maximize it going forward?
- What are three areas I need to grow in the next 90 days? One year?

You cannot afford *not* to know how to reinvent your future. If thinking forward does not come natural to you, then make it a scheduled discipline.

Others of us have the opposite problem. Our problem is not a lack of ideas about the future. We have a whole closet full of yesterday's ideas that never got anywhere. Our problem is not thinking up something new, but it is paying for what we order, what I call "Doing Friday Payroll."

Friday payroll is all the things I have to do today that are fulfilling past commitments. How are you delivering on yesterday's promises? Being a visionary by itself will not secure your future. Visionaries must tool themselves to follow through. Ideas are a dime a dozen. Wanna Be's have tons of ideas. Those who succeed are those who know how to take an idea and make it happen.

Keeping payroll current is a discipline, and I'm not talking about cutting and mailing the checks. Those of us with our heads in the clouds have to schedule a regular descent to earth where we schedule ourselves to be on the ground and get dirty doing what it takes to make the future happen. The future happens today. If active implementation is not part of my today then tomorrow will never arrive.

If you don't develop the discipline of follow through, people under you get frustrated and burn out. Soon we will find we are not leading at all but we will turn around and realize we are just going on a walk because no one is behind us. They all quit because they got tired of picking up our dropped balls. People will stop trusting us. Ideas bank on the credibility of delivery. To the degree that you are known for making things happen, your ideas will find a greater hearing.

So get out the bills, see what promises you owe—no matter how big or how small—and start writing checks.

3. Having Heart & Using Your Head

Conventional wisdom is always enamored with the flavor of the day. Sometimes a new flavor is a much needed addition. One of the latest flavors of trendy leadership theory is the rise in popularity of leading from the heart. The reappreciation of the assets of a leader with a high EQ or Emotional Quotient is a breath of fresh air from the days past of business tyrants when it seemed like being a jerk was a standing prerequisite to promotion. In truth, however, both of our abilities to think and feel are critical to successful leadership.

The realization that the heart was critical to leadership was a long overdue correction. The traditional choleric, task-driven approach to business was heavily dependent on a right-brain addiction to linear logic. In this incarnation, the essence of every business—it was thought—could be mapped on org charts and spreadsheets. Well, maybe so, but such businesses had a massive blind spot: their human capital.

It took a generational shift to correct this imbalance. People who grew up with parents from the automation age, simply did not buy it. They saw through the emperor's new clothes and did not mind saying so. They saw the life carnage of that world and refused to sign up.

When they were old enough to start their own businesses and write their own business books, they wrote a very different story. They saw that every business transaction is actually a human interaction. They knew that not just our intellect, but all of our senses are crucial to accurate perception and decision making. We need to listen not just to reason, but to our gut as well. The spirit proved a more sensitive and accurate instrument for leadership than people had previously given it credit.

After the recent West Virginia Sago coal mine disaster, the ABC news magazine show, PrimeTime Live interviewed Wilbur Ross, the rust take-over mogul who owns Sago. Ross was squirming under ABC's grilling questions about the safety of the Sago mine and his complicity as a junk investor. To try and make the best of a PR disaster, Ross explained that his holding company had set up a two million dollar fund to help out the families of the victims of the accident. Then ABC's reporter asked a question for which the heart would tell you there was only one right answer. He asked this man who is worth more than one billion dollars, if he had made a personal contribution. He had not. That was not the right answer. Ross, who is a master at squeezing profit out of businesses that others had long discarded as worthless, had made an unforgivable mistake as a leader. In a time of human tragedy, he had not acted instinctively from his heart.

There are those of us right-brained leaders who still need further tutoring in left-brain efficiency. If that's you, one of the easiest ways to increase your EQ, or heart-based leadership ability, is to constantly be querying those around you who are naturally your opposite. You need to see with the eyes of your heart before you can factor the left-brain picture of the world more effectively into your right-brain leadership maximization equation.

With that said, there is no need to throw the baby out with the bath water. Business is not a séance session. Some of us need to come back to earth and deal with reality. A business that is all heart and no profit will be soon be sadly hugging people as they go out the door just before the lights are turned off. If you are not using your head, then don't be surprised when your heart finds itself in a world of hurt.

Much of business is still right-brain dependent and always will be. The bottom line is still the bottom line. Every business deal is a very complex series of chess moves that must be mapped on a moving board with multiple threats on all sides. If you try to play checkers in a world of chess, don't be surprised when you get wiped off the board.

Even the most careful of us are sometimes not careful enough. NASA is as right-brained as they come. Yet the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger just after take off exposed the tragic mistake that something had been missed. The culprit, it later turned out, was the faulty design of a simple O-ring gasket. The pre-launch planning had not been thorough enough.

It only takes one O-ring failure to blow any business apart. Business failures invariably can be traced back to overlooked flaws in the original plan. Do you know all the critical factors to the challenge sitting on your desk? Have you thought through your potential weak gaskets? What are the other minds you have engaged to help you think it all through?

I must use heart and head to successfully navigate all the horizons in today's business sky.

4. Thinking Corporately & Working Functionally

In one of the most famous episodes of the *I Love Lucy* show, Lucy and Ethel got jobs on the conveyor belt of a candy factory. At first Lucy is fine wrapping the candies as they go by. But then she eats a few and gets behind. Lucy begins frantically trying to catch up. Then to her dismay, the belt speeds up. She can't keep pace and panics. The chocolates keep coming. As they start falling off the end unattended, she eventually starts stuffing them down her uniform just to make them disappear.

Learn a lesson from Lucy. You have to keep an eye both on your candy and on the conveyor belt. You have to do your own work at the same time you see it in the larger process of everything headed your way. A balanced leader thinks both functionally and corporately. We all have to fulfill our function in the process. Like Lucy, that means keeping focused on executing my step.

The danger is to work with your head down all the time and never look up to see what's going on around you. Taking in the larger view means thinking corporately. You can't just have a silo mentality. Business is an organism and I have to stay connected to its bigger picture to be effective at my small part of it.

How many businesses have been sunk by someone "just doing their job"? The Captain of the Titanic got obsessed with one goal. He felt pressure from the Cunard Line for the new ship on its maiden voyage to break the transatlantic crossing record. That tunnel vision caused him to go faster than he ordinarily would have in an area with reported icebergs. When the Lookout cried, "Ice dead ahead!" and he felt the scraping crunch against the hull, the more global picture of the ship's true situation flashed startlingly before him. But it was too late.

Every captain at the wheel needs to have both a clear focus on specific objectives and an unobstructed view of the 360° context. Where do you tend to be over focused: on the big picture or on your plate? The key is to do both: to think corporately as you work functionally.

5. Leading Others & Managing Yourself

Leadership has an inner and an outer dimension. Being a leader means both leading yourself and leading others.

If you are called a leader and no one is following you, then you are sadly mistaken. Leadership requires moving people. There are two animals that come to mind, the first is the lion. The lion leads a pride. The pride is the group of other cats whose welfare he oversees. He makes sure they are fed. He takes the lead and sees that they get rest. He protects them from attack. He mediates the pecking order and keeps everyone in line. When a pride of lions has no leader, what it faces is an inner battle: lions fighting each other for control. When there is a healthy leader at the top, the pride is at peace and can function and grow.

Leadership is like that at all levels. People need direction. That direction can have input from below but it has to be established from the top down. It is axiomatic that leaders have to lead. They have to take the initiative. They make it incumbent upon themselves to get the group from point A to point B. If the group is dysfunctional, then at some level it is always the leader's fault. Leaders own the bottom line no matter how many other people are involved with the variables.

Hurricane Katrina was a classic case study in the breakdown of leadership. It was not from lack of a plan. The multi-million-dollar contingency study of a direct hit on New Orleans was sitting there in three-ring binders on the shelf. It was not from lack of resources. All the relief supplies were sitting in warehouses around the country. A fleet of buses was sitting in a parking lot in New Orleans. It was simply a problem of people not leading. The Mayor of New Orleans did not take the lead protecting his city with a rigorous evacuation. The director of FEMA did not take the initiative to act decisively once the problem was obvious. It was all a comedy of errors caused by inaction. No one acted like a lion and took the lead.

There is a second type of animal, however, that makes a dangerous leader: the lemming. Lemmings are a small rodent living in the Arctic circle that are famous in urban legend for mass suicidal plunges off cliffs following their leader. The lemming leader is highly effective at moving people. The problem is that he is leading them over the cliff. Enron was a case of a lemming leadership disaster. The lemming has no internal moral compass. He does not lead himself before he leads others. He steps out in a whimsical direction and takes others with him.

The scandals of the last decade were the result of people not leading themselves. They read too many books about leading others and they mastered that black magic. But they never dealt with the potential blackness lurking inside each of us in our own inner soul. You have to lead yourself before you can safely lead others.

The wisest man of all times, Solomon, in his Book of Proverbs advised to learn from the ant that drives itself even though "it has no commander." He needs no constant cheerleading from those around him to get out of bed and gather food before the harsh winds of winter kill all nutrition above the ground. He leads and manages himself.

Where do you need to push yourself? Where have you indulged inner moral laziness? A leader who does not hold himself to a high standard on inner character before he takes the lead, risks becoming a lemming.

6. Feeling Confident & Being Humble

With an orange clay twang, the country singer croons from the radio, “Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble . . . when you’re perfect in ev–er–y way! Ev’ry time I look in the mirror, I get better look’in each day!” Humility and confidence are a difficult alchemy to simultaneously pull off. Yet, a leader needs both.

A leader without confidence simply is not a leader at all. Action always flows from self-assurance. There is nothing wrong with knowing what you are good at and moving forward without apology to make it happen. That is what leaders do. But an overdose of self-confidence always ends up smelling rotten. I might not smell it, but others do. And they will eventually react. No one likes to work for a know-it-all who knows he knows it all. Even the most sure-footed goat needs to embody genuine humility a little bit along the way.

Humility doesn’t mean that you dismiss your strengths. It means that you simply realize that you are not the sum total of the formula for success. Any formula for success must include others, favorable circumstances and usually a pinch of luck. Humility is the genuine adoption of that mindset.

Being confident means accepting who you are and doing what you know needs to be done. Being humble means recognizing what you aren’t, accepting who others are and the willingness to enlist their help. Confidence does not mean omnicompetence, and humility does not mean self-flagellation. Being humble means admitting your shortcomings and asking the help of others whose strengths complement your weaknesses. The alloy of both is the recipe for a potent leader.

The Apostle Paul was a hard-driving leader who did not slow down to curry to anybody, yet he had the broader wisdom to admit the importance to “not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” That kind of balanced self-assessment is what it means to be confident and humble at the same time.

7. Embracing Team & Performing Alone

In the summer of 2004, America fielded a “dream team” of the world’s best basketball talent to the Olympics in Athens, Greece for the much-heralded return of the Olympiad to its original motherland. The “Dream Team”, however proved a poor commercial for the pure virtue of sporting excellence symbolized by the iconic interlocking rings.

Americans had only lost two basketball games in Olympic history. But in Athens they lost three games and came home in shame with the ignominious booby prize of a bronze medal. The team’s roster was the Who’s Who in the world fraternity of Phi Slamma Jamma. They were all air and nothing but net. Unfortunately, they were also nothing but prima donnas. They were not a team. Each was playing only for himself. Or at least that is the way it appeared. Perhaps they had never really learned to be a team player. Perhaps they had been coddled as ‘the talent’ so long they had no appreciation for the team.

As they each put on their individual performances, their less experienced opponents played them like the Harlem Globe Trotters. With the Americans distracted by their own center-court grandstanding, the underdogs pulled off the upset by simply playing as a team. They proved that a sum is greater than its parts. The Americans never added up to a whole. Just working in a group does not make you a team.

But at the same time there are situations when you have to deliver solo. Not everything is done as a team. Some work is attached to my calendar with my name assigned to it and no one else's. For that I must have the discipline to carve out the energy and time to 'just go get it done.' No big party. No group effort. No mutual motivation. Just my assignment and me. Every successful athlete knows the loneliness of preparation and training. Successful sustainable leaders can operate on a team and perform alone.

In conclusion, for Bruce Wayne to survive in the new Gotham City, he had to morph. He had to add to his capabilities. He could not afford to be a one-talent super hero. He could no longer be a one-ball wonder. The reality is none of us can change the fundamental make up we were born with. But, we can add to our competencies in order to balance out our areas of weakness with new learned disciplines.

The leaders I see on the rocks invariably ran blind trusting only in their strengths while neglecting the development of supporting competencies. The problem is not that they were one way or the other. It was that they never compensated for their deficiency. This is one dog that has no favorites. It will bite either hand.

Each of these seven pairs represents a needed dyad of competence for sustained success in the modern market. Although one may come easier to us, today you need some mixture of both. If you rely on just one, you are setting yourself up to get sunk by the other. Ambidexterity comes only with practice. It is like improving your backhand. There are times when you will not be able to win the game without it.

While none of us will ever be omnicompetent, the realities of today's business demand we all have to work to become more multicompetent. Like Batman, our mantra is to diversify our bag of tricks or perish.