

Leaders Treat Learning Like Dirty Dishes

By Bette Price, CMC

True leaders are humble enough to realize they don't know it all and that it is imperative to continually seek out new knowledge. That's why Linda Huett, President and CEO of Weight Watchers International says that learning is like dirty dishes—"You never finish in terms of your own development," she says. "No matter what you're appointed, you are still just learning, and you've got as much to learn from the people who work for you as you've got to give them," she confesses.

Leaders learn from a variety of sources. During interviews with 27 of the nation's most successful CEOs and Presidents for the book True Leaders, leaders revealed that they are avid readers of books; they listen to audiotapes; they seek out advice from experts, peers, and mentors; and they even resort to sage advice given by parents. They openly embrace a process of self-discovery and view most mistakes as learning experiences. Interestingly enough, they even glean powerful lessons from bad examples.

Jack Kahl, founder of Manco, Inc., had the good fortune to meet Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, when Kahl was a young entrepreneur, calling on the giant retailer as a client. About the third time Kahl met Walton, Kahl was carrying with him a book. He handed it to Sam. Sam looked at the book and said to Kahl, "You're a real student of management, aren't you Jack?" Then he told Kahl he'd make a deal with him suggesting that if Kahl would share with him the best things he had read and learned from, he would do the same with Kahl. That momentary exchange turned into a lifetime friendship not just based on learning, but on loving to learn together. "At home I have two leather-bound books—each of them several inches high---of letters from Sam that we shared because of our loving

to learn together,” Kahl said. From 1976 to 1988, Kahl continued to learn from Sam Walton and the learning worked so well that it helped Kahl to grow his little entrepreneurial venture into a multi-million dollar business that has now become global.

Learning from the experienced

David Novak, Chairman and CEO of TriCon Global restaurants says that every person he has ever worked for has invested in him and he in them. Novak believes that individuals are a product of what they are exposed to. “If you stay among the same group of friends or the same company without getting outside of your industry, you will become very limited in your thinking,” Novak explains. He reads everything he can about leadership. And, he takes advantage of the opportunity to meet experienced peers who he can also learn from. “How many people get a chance to meet with Jack Welch?” he asks. “Now I can keep that conversation to myself, or I can share what I’ve learned,” Novak says. So, he learns from experienced business associates and then passes the learning on to his own team of leaders. “I get to meet people—do things, go places—that most people will never ever get to do. So I think what I need to do is share it—not just keep it for myself—give credit where credit is due and share it.”

Tim Webster, CEO of American Italian Pasta has a board chairman within a corporate set-up that is more common in Europe than it is in the United States. His board chairman is a retired executive from the Kellogg Company who spends two to three days a month with Webster and his leadership team, primarily mentoring them. After 30 years with Kellogg, the chairman has an incredible depth of knowledge and experience and a mastery of so many disciplines that Webster feels he has benefited greatly from the experience. Dan Woodward is another CEO who has drawn from experience. As CEO of Enherent, an IT architecture and design company, Woodward hired his former boss, Jack Mullinax,

to be the CFO and Executive Vice President. Woodward first worked with Mullinax as a young financial analyst when he joined IBM. “He made such an impression on me that I always looked for opportunities to work with him,” Woodward said. Several years ago the two were put together in a joint venture headed up by Woodward prior to joining Enherent. “After I came her, I lured him out of IBM and got him to hold off on retirement for a couple of years to help me,” the CEO said. Woodward credits his colleague for having had more aggregate impact on him over the years than anyone.

Learn from bad bosses

Unlikely as it may sound, many of the successful CEOs and Presidents interviewed actually learned from what Ann Hambly calls “reverse mentoring.” Hambly, Managing Director of Prudential Asset Resources, says she had a lot of reverse mentoring. “I’ve had a few bosses that treated me in such a way that I will never, ever treat an employee like that,” she said. Hambly learned from these negative examples and made a promise to herself that she would never be that kind of a boss.

“It’s funny how the negative examples stick with you,” said Jim Copeland, CEO of Deloitte & Touche, one of the worlds’ leading accounting, tax, and consulting firms. “I remember we had a managing partner who said if you have over ten hours of overtime, you have to have it approved before you work it. We were in the midst of this busy season, and a manager that was working on one of my jobs was going to go beyond the 50 hours allocated, and it was a Saturday or Sunday night before we figured that out.” Copeland told the man to go ahead and work the hours. When the managing partner found out the next day he told Copeland the time wouldn’t be paid. Copeland took a strong position against that managing partner’s decision and the man got paid. “It was just a classic example of somebody absolutely determined to have his will obeyed no matter whether it happened to

make sense to the circumstances or not. It was just absolutely stupid.” It was a lesson he never forgot.

Learn from quotes and tapes

Terri Bowersock is dyslexic. She learned the hard way that even with learning disabilities, people can be successful if they believe in themselves and have the courage to find new ways to learn. Bowersock’s disability was not recognized during her early learning years. Although she learned to fake her way through high school, she could never make it at college. But, she didn’t let that stop her. After visiting a family friend’s small consignment store, Bowersock had a dream. She drew the plans for her business dream with crayons and pictures because she couldn’t write a business plan. With her dream and her pictures and a \$2000 loan from her grandmother, Terri Bowersock opened her first consignment store in Phoenix, Arizona. Today she operates a multi-million dollar owned and franchised company, has never had to borrow money from a bank, and has hired a CEO and a CFO for the things that require their respective kinds of education. She laughs about the fact that she doesn’t have a business degree. “What I do have is a BMW degree,” she says with a smile. “That’s because in my car (a BMW, of course) I’m never without a cassette.” That’s how Bowersock continues to learn—by listening to tapes of success stories about other entrepreneurs.

As trite as it may seem, several of these leaders use notable quotes to remind them of things they’ve already learned, but can so easily forget to do. At Manco, notable quotes hang everywhere throughout the corporate headquarters. The quotes are so popular that Kahl has had a booklet of quotes put together to give to visiting guests who frequently ask for copies. To Kahl, it’s just another way of passing the learning along.

Learn from mistakes

Facing up to mistakes can be great learning opportunities. Linda Huett says that far too often leaders look for scapegoats when a mistake is made. “Usually it isn’t any one individual’s fault anyway,” she says. “We all make mistakes. We try not to have them, and we certainly don’t do them intentionally.” Living up to mistakes, talking about them, and facing reality helps the learning process she says. “Learning from the mistakes is what’s really important,” she says.

Mike McCarthy, Chairman of McCarthy Building Companies, one of the country’s top ten commercial builders, owned up to a big mistake several years ago. And, it taught him a very hard lesson. McCarthy said that the company grew quickly and got too big. “I wasn’t watching it as I should have been,” he confessed. As a result, the company lost \$22 million in one year. That resulted in losing their bonding and their financial backing. It was an incredibly difficult time for McCarthy, resulting in having to lay people off. “I drove around the country with my wife and two little babies in a Dodge minivan and a trailer for our clothes,” he said. “I personally went and laid every person off. The reason I did this was because I had screwed it up. They had done their jobs, I hadn’t done mine, but they were going to lose their jobs while I got to keep mine. I wanted to have the pain of doing that so I would never forget.” McCarthy said it was a major mistake, but also a major learning experience that he never forgot as he worked to restructure and rebuild the company.

Leaders certainly continue their learning by attending more formalized educational programs as well. Some attend special executive think tanks; some attend special educational programs or seminars conducted by collegiate scholars or CEO peers. But, for the most part, the learning continues in a variety of less formal ways. Leaders even learn from humility, as confessed by Gary McDaniel, CEO of Chateau Communities. McDaniels

believes that many times in a leadership position, ego tends to get in the way. “When you do that,” he says, “the balance of the organization suffers. He shares a story that brought this point home to him early in his leadership development. McDaniel was a second lieutenant in the Air Force and had worked with on individual for over a year when he found out he was going to be transferred to another assignment. “I was bemoaning the situation and saying, ‘Gosh, I’m so good, who’s going to come and take my place—how can anybody do this just as good as me?’ when the man taught me a very important lesson.” The man responded to McDaniel by saying, “Lieutenant, if you pull your arm out of a bucket of water, how long does the hole last?” “I’ve taken that with me for the last 30 years of so,” said McDaniel. “It’s a very true statement—the hole doesn’t last very long. Neither do leaders with self-inflated egos.”

So, like dirty dishes, learning is never quite finished. There is always learning to be done—through books, tapes, good bosses, bad bosses, peers, even mistakes. True leaders know that in a world of constant change, one thing remains unchanged—there is always something new to be learned if you are humble enough to admit it and courageous enough to seek.

How open are you to keep on learning? Ask yourself these questions:

- ☞☞ Who are your mentors?
- ☞☞ What other leaders in your organization are you learning from?
- ☞☞ What do you do to demonstrate your commitment to continual learning?
- ☞☞ How humble are you are about things to be learned?
- ☞☞ What do you do to share what you have learned?
- ☞☞ Who are you not taking time to learn from that may provide unexpected knowledge?

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