

# **Leadership Qualities: Double-Loop Learning**

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An old story has a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi fishing together on a small lake. The discussion comes around to the differences between Christianity and Judaism and the bottom line of their differences is clear: Jewish people follow the Law of Moses and Christians follow the example of Christ. But the rabbi is interested in the practical difference this might make in terms of behavior.

Just then, a gust of wind blows the priest's hat off his head. He climbs out of the boat, walks over to his hat and returns to the boat. Not five minutes later, the same thing happens to the minister. The wind blows his hat off; he climbs out of the boat, casually walks over to his hat and returns to his companions. The rabbi is astonished. These Christians seem to have a power he had no understanding of. Sure enough, the next breeze blows his own hat onto the water. Assuring himself that his faith is as great as theirs, he steps from the boat and promptly sinks. The minister turns to the priest and says, "Do you suppose we should have shown him where the rocks are?"

Leaders know where the rocks are before they step out onto the water. A rock can either be a stepping stone or a stumbling block. The difference is whether or not we know about the rocks in advance.

## ***The Speed of Learning***

As technology has increased our speed of operation, organizational life is becoming more and more complicated. The sheer volume of information can overwhelm the decision maker and

problem solver. Peter Senge discusses the idea of “the learning organization”<sup>1</sup> in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. His main thesis is that if we aren’t learning, we are on the fast track to extinction.<sup>2</sup>

Karl Weick reports a tragic example of this. He says that firefighters are more likely to suffer severe injury and even fatalities after their 10<sup>th</sup> year on the job than when they are rookies. His theory is that after 10 years on the job, they begin taking their knowledge of firefighting for granted. They begin to think that they have seen it all and “become less open to new information that would allow them to update their models.”<sup>3</sup> By refusing to learn new things, we fall prey to our own ignorance.

Dr. Winston Chen, founder and former CEO of Solectron, the largest electronics contract manufacturer in the world, says that “twenty percent of an engineer’s knowledge becomes obsolete every year.”<sup>4</sup> His quote came more than 10 years ago. If anything, the shelf-life of technological knowledge is shorter now than it was then. Clearly, the need to view oneself as a life-long learner is necessary just to survive in our culture. Leadership these days is either well-informed, ill-prepared or nonexistent.

### ***Turning Knowledge into Wisdom***

Our society is information fat and wisdom thin. Leaders today must work diligently to develop a learning culture of data management where data (undigested facts) can become information (facts organized by outside sources but not yet integrated into your thinking), which then can

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<sup>1</sup> Others who have explored the concept of learning organizations include David Hutchens, *Outlearning the Wolves* (Williston, VT: Pegasus Communications, 2000); Peter Kline and Bernard Saunders, *Ten Steps to a Learning Organization* (Arlington, VA: Great Ocean Publishers, 1998); and Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in John Geirland, “Complicate Yourself,” *Wired*, April 1996, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Executive Speechwriter Newsletter, 8 (1993), p. 6.

become knowledge (internalized information), which can be refined into wisdom (integrated knowledge).<sup>5</sup>

One way to accomplish this is through a process known as “double-loop learning.” This phrase comes from Chris Argyris’ article “Teaching Smart People How to Learn.”<sup>6</sup> In this landmark article, Argyris argues that there are two different kinds of learning: single-loop and double-loop. The classic example he provides is that of a thermostat. In single-loop learning, a thermostat set to 68 degrees turns up the heat whenever the temperature drops below 68. In double-loop learning, however, one asks why the thermostat is set to 68 degrees in the first place. Is that the optimum temperature? Single-loop learning solves immediate problems, but double-loop learning attempts to address the root causes of problems.

Jesus modeled this essential discipline of effective leadership. We have the luxury of learning from it because John recorded the event for us in John 21. The Apostle John could have ended his account of Jesus’ story with the resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene and the other apostles. He is risen! And he has breathed out his Holy Spirit on his disciples. What more is there to say? “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). That sounds like a good ending.

But there is still one loose end to tie up, and it is not incidental to the story. Peter had failed Jesus miserably. Overwhelmed by intense pressure, he had abandoned his mentor and friend in the moment Jesus most needed his friendship and support. How humiliated and

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<sup>5</sup> These distinctions are adapted from Harlan Cleveland in *The Knowledge Executive: Leadership in an Information Society* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985), pp. 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> First published in the *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 1991, pp. 99-109.

degraded Peter must have felt. But John was careful to record the amazing story of how Jesus reconstructed and restored Peter:

When they had finished eating [breakfast], Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

John 21:15-19

Notice how carefully Jesus proceeded. He could have delivered a lecture on commitment. He didn't. He could have drawn a diagram on dedication. He didn't. Jesus didn't address Peter's behavior at all; he knew he didn't have to. Rather, Jesus penetrated to the heart of the problem and of the man who had the problem. He realized that good behavior grows out of a good heart.

John gives us one detail about the fire on the beach that morning: it was a fire of burning coals (v. 9). This is not just an insignificant detail John threw in. This is meant to remind us of another fire: “Now the slaves and the officers were standing [in the courtyard of the high priest], having made *a charcoal fire*, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself” (John 18:18, NASB, *emphasis added*). It was beside that fire that Peter denied knowing Jesus.

Now, they are alone together for perhaps the first time since that charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest. Peter must feel vulnerable, waiting for Jesus to say something. But

instead of a sermon or a verdict, he hears a question. The question wounds him, heals him, brings him back to life and haunts him until the grave: “Do you love me?” Jesus does not ask if Peter is sorry for what he’s done. He does not ask Peter to promise never to do it again. He does not tell Peter to try harder. Peter’s behavior is not the most important issue – that’s just the first-loop. The second-loop looks at the underlying causes of the behavior.

Three times Peter denied his Lord; three times Jesus forced Peter to examine the root cause of his problem. While Peter’s behavioral problem was important, Jesus knew that a change wouldn’t last unless the root of the behavior was addressed. God wants to deal with the issues or your heart, not just your behavior.

As a leader who is committed to God’s best for your followers, learn well the lesson of double-loop learning. First time around the loop – behavior. Second time around the loop – values and attitudes that drive behavior. Great leaders don’t stop after one lap around the loop.

### ***The Mystery of God***

We think we know more than we do. We often use words like *time*, *energy*, *spirit* and *God*, but we would probably be hard-pressed to define specifically what we mean by these terms. The explosion of scientific knowledge in this century has answered many questions, but it appears that the more we know about the natural order, the more subtle and mysterious it becomes. If creation is filled with mysteries, how much more inscrutable is the Author of creation? The existence and nature of an uncreated being we call God would be utterly beyond our imaginations had he not chosen to reveal himself to us. The prophet Isaiah advises us:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Isaiah 55:6-11

God’s thoughts and ways transcend our own, and we do well to trust and obey him even when we fail to understand what he is doing in our lives. We are incapable of probing the depths of his purposes, but Scripture assures us that nothing will thwart God’s plans. His Word will not return to him empty but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he has sent it (v. 11).

This same sentiment is voiced in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Romans 11:33

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.

1 Corinthians 1:25

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

1 Corinthians 2:9

Since these things are so, our only proper response to God’s initiatives is submission and obedience. We will never learn his ways if we rebel or judge him according to our own standards and understanding.

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). As new technology allows us to more closely examine creation, we find that seemingly simple things are far more complex than we have

thought them to be. The created order is more subtle, elegant and information-rich than we could have imagined. In fact, the more we learn about the universe, the more mysterious it seems to become. If that is true of the physical universe, how much greater is that the truth of the spiritual realm? In spite of all our best attempts to control things, God's ways are mysterious.

Wisdom calls us to respond to the things that the Lord has revealed to us without trying to demand answers that he has not chosen to give. As a leader, you may find this difficult to accept. After all, you possess a certain amount of knowledge and authority within your area of expertise. And, as a Christ-follower, you are making an effort to know God better. But as you read this and other passages that speak to God's awesome character, you'll find – as many learned theologians have in centuries past – that all human knowledge of God comprises merely the faintest scratch on the surface of what there is to be known.

Still, “the things revealed belong to us and our children.” Wisdom understands the difference between “the secret things” and “the things revealed.” John Locke wrote:

‘Tis of great use to the Sailor to know the length of his Line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the Ocean. ‘Tis well he knows, that it is long enough to reach the bottom at such Places as are necessary to direct his Voyage, and caution him against running upon Shoals, that may ruine him. Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our Conduct. If we can find out those Measures, whereby a rational Creature, put in that State, which Man is in, in this World, may, and ought to govern his Opinions and Actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled that some other things scape our Knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Learning from Failure: The Negative Example of Saul***

All of us can relate to the painful truth of George Santayana's observation that “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.”<sup>8</sup> There is a vast difference between someone who has 40 years of experience and someone who has simply repeated the same failures for 40

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<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Yorkshire, England: Scolar Press, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> George Santayana, *A Life of Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 399.

years. Some people are like Charlie Brown trying to kick the football. They think this time they'll get it, but Lucy always pulls it away at the last moment. They end up flat on their backs again wondering what happened. There is something beneficial to optimism, but there is something more beneficial to learning from the mistakes of our past.

Failure to learn lessons from the past is only part of the problem; we also struggle with responding in timely and appropriate ways to current situations. Biblically speaking, no one exemplifies this failure to respond correctly to God's truth than King Saul (1 Samuel 13:1-22; 15:1-35). When Saul observed his troops abandoning him, he felt pressured to take matters into his own hands rather than to follow the clear instructions given to him earlier by the prophet Samuel. As soon as he had done so, Samuel appeared on the scene and rebuked Saul for his presumption and disobedience. Had Saul only waited a little longer and listened to the prophet's words, he would have saved himself a lot of trouble. God often waits until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour before he comes.

Instead of gaining insight from this stinging encounter, Saul commits the exact same sin in chapter 15. He neglects the clear commandment of God and redefines it to suit his purposes. He not only fails to learn from his past mistake, he rationalizes his inappropriate response to Samuel's orders by protesting, "But I did obey the Lord" (15:20).

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear" is an expression that Jesus often used to stress the need for people to learn from and act upon his teachings (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4: 9, 23). When his disciples failed to gain insight from the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus asked them, "Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?" (Mark 8:18; cf. Matthew 13:15).

If a person fails to learn from experiences and respond in appropriate ways to new information and conditions, that person is not only doomed to repeat the failure; that person is simply doomed. Appropriate responses are related not only to communication but also to character. Those who are teachable and willing to seek and apply wise counsel are far more likely to learn from their failures and to adapt that insight to new situations.

### ***Learning from Failure: The Positive Example of Peter***

It's tough to teach new behaviors. Yet leadership requires change and growth to achieve new and better systems and results. But sustaining the change is often tougher than initiating it. Jesus and Peter teach us how double-loop learning – learning new behavior and attitudes that sustain new behavior – works.

Here's an enlightening exercise: Read the short book of 1 Peter; then read Peter's story in one of the Gospels. Observe how much of what Peter wrote in this book was forged from his own experience under Jesus' discipleship. For example, the man who called himself "a witness of Christ's sufferings" (5:1) was not there when Jesus was hanging on the cross; he was hiding in fear. The man who calls us to be "eager to serve" (5:2) remained seated while Jesus washed everyone's feet. The man who tells us that we should be "clear minded and self-controlled so that [we] can pray" (4:7) fell asleep while Jesus was sweating blood. The man who so boldly tells us to "submit [ourselves] for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (2:13) lopped a Roman soldier's ear off in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the Gospels, Peter appears almost buffoonish at times (jumping out of boats, correcting Jesus, talking aimlessly). And he ultimately denied any knowledge of Jesus after publicly boasting of his brave devotion. But in his letter we find evidence that Peter had taken

Jesus' correction to heart. He examined. He thought. He evaluated. He addressed his problem seriously.

From his writings we know that Peter didn't simply execute a quick fix of his behavior. He examined definitions and attitudes that let him think that his destructive behavior was acceptable. When he wrote, "prepare your minds...be self-controlled...set your hope" (1:13), he was addressing attitudes that determine actions. When he wrote, "rid yourself of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander" (2:1), he was not suggesting only that the reader develop new behavioral patterns. He knew that, unless a person adjusts these internal constructs, problematic behavior will follow.

This does not minimize behavior. People must act appropriately, but Peter understood from the Master that behavior is an outgrowth of deeper, fundamental issues (see Luke 6:39-49). Leaders need to learn how to behave appropriately themselves and then teach followers how to behave. But consistency in doing what's right requires that learners go around the learning loop a second time. They have to address issues of heart and soul that determine how, how consistently and why the problematic behavior is being practiced.

### ***Going Around the Loop Twice***

Solomon contrasted the difference between trying to help a mocker and a wise man to learn:

Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

Proverbs 9:7-9

The "mocker" (or "fool") is characterized by unwillingness to address character issues. The fool will not learn how to deal with values and habits that generate destructive behavior. Some skills

are easy to learn, but the belief systems that govern the use of skills are often deeply internalized and difficult to address.

Chris Argyris coined terms to differentiate learning that solves immediate problems (“Single Loop Learning”) from learning that addresses the root causes of problems (“Double Loop Learning”). He observes:

Most people define learning too narrowly as mere “problem solving,” so they focus on identifying and correcting errors in the external environment. Solving problems is important. But if learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behavior, identify the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization’s problems, and then change how they act. In particular, they must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right.<sup>9</sup>

The single loop tends to be the easy one. We can teach a person to modify his or her angry outbursts. But the second loop forces the person to deal with the anger that generates the outburst. The second loop is essential to solving the problem but more difficult to address. So leaders often stop with the single loop. This leads to a sad but true fact that Larry Crabb rightly observes, “Most of us make it through life by coping, not changing.”<sup>10</sup>

Solomon notes that wise men learn what they need to know. Argyris’ language clarifies the issue by pointing out that wise men go twice around the learning loop. It is in the Holy Spirit’s job description to convict us of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). But that’s just going around the loop once. It is also in the Holy Spirit’s job description to guide us into all truth and complete the work of transforming our characters in the image of Christ Jesus (John 16:13; 2 Corinthians 3:18). That’s going around the loop twice.

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<sup>9</sup> Argyris, “Teaching Smart People to Learn,” pp. 99-100.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992), p. 31.