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Do You Possess the Discipline to Lead?

By Guest Author James King, Ph.D., Dean of the School of Business at the University of Mary Hardin Baylor

Do you have it? Do you have that single-minded focus that's driven by something seen in your mind, felt in your heart, but not visible to the eye?

Do you have the fortitude to stay the course in the midst of adversity? Do you have the stamina required to lead your organization through all types of situations with long-term survival and success as overarching goals? In short, do you have the discipline to lead?

John F. Kennedy wrote, "The life of the artist is, in relation to his work, stern and lonely. He has labored hard, often amid deprivation, to perfect his skill. He has turned aside from quick success in order to strip his vision of everything secondary or cheapening. His working life is marked by intensive application and intense discipline."

Substitute "leader" for "artist and you get an idea of the resolve required for a disciplined leader. Like the artist who sees a masterpiece when others see a blank canvas, the disciplined leader sees the structure in unstructured decision-making situations when others see only unrelated problems.

Unfortunately, the definition of disciplined leadership is not always clear to others. While this situation is not an entirely new phenomenon, it does seem more apparent and critical in today's business environment. Today, we refer to the "New World Economy" and the "Information Age" as if business were Hollywood fabrication. We see the dot com millionaires as high-profile geniuses. But in reality, in this current business environment of dot-com failures, increased global competitive pressures and pay-at-your-laptop M.B.A. graduates, it is harder than ever to "see" truly great business leaders. The picture of the disciplined leader is dimming; the concept of disciplined leadership is fading away.

The picture has faded because of the worldview of business leadership. The world sees business leaders such as Lee Iacocca and Bill Gates as if they were Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. These businessmen are high profile – and highly accomplished. We see them on television. We read about them in our local newspapers. They always seem to be in the public eye. That is the world's picture of today's business leader: charismatic and combative, aggressive and arrogant, and powerful and omnipotent.

But the world's picture of today's business leader is not the picture of the truly disciplined leader. That picture is one of courage and consideration, intellect and integrity, and determination and dependability. This style of leadership captures the essence of discipline. You can see it. You can feel it. You know what it is. You know what it is not.

Discipline is a structured system of rules governing conduct or activity, not fame. Leadership is the directing of activities, not the manipulation of the press. Disciplined leadership is about long-term, enduring success, not quick profit. A disciplined leader uses a structured system of rules to govern the directing of activities. The disciplined leader is not a performer.

Disciplined leadership requires the kind of resolve that results in years, even decades, of continuous success. In the Harvard Business Review, consultant and author Jim Collins calls this disciplined leadership "Level Five Leadership." Philosopher Peter Koestenbaum, writing in Fast Company, calls it "transformational leadership." But they both are talking about the same thing: Long-term, sustainable leadership through personal humility, authenticity, professional competence and will combined with personal and professional

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integrity.

This long-term, sustainable leadership requires a structured system of rules to govern its behavior. This type of leadership possesses the character described by Collins and Koestenbaum. This type of leadership requires the discipline of the artist as described by President Kennedy. This is the type of leadership of a disciplined leader.

Do you possess such a structured system of rules that governs your leadership behavior? Do you have the unquestionable character described by Collins and Koestenbaum? Do you have the intense discipline described by President Kennedy?

And do you really have the discipline to lead?

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