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HIGHLIGHTING OTHERS: Sharing the Leadership Spotlight



By John Baldoni

When U.S. presidential candidate John Kerry chose John Edwards as his running mate, the overnight polls of likely voters registered strong approval. While Edwards radiates charm, Kerry has been called “charisma challenged.” As communicators, Edwards is warm and articulate whereas Kerry is stolid and steadfast. Despite an obvious appeal for votes, Kerry’s choice of Edwards says something more about his potential presidential leadership style: he is not afraid to share the limelight.

Sharing the Limelight with Others

Kerry and Edwards have a parallel in the corporate world at General Motors in Rick Wagner, CEO, and Bob Lutz, vice chairman. When Wagner became CEO in the late 1990s, corporate America was in the era of the heroic CEO; the pages of American business magazines were packed with laudatory profiles of men and women in charge, those who ruled with power as well as impunity. Many CEOs became intoxicated with their own image and as a result failed; the corporate scandals were stoked in part by those at the top believing in their own invincibility as well as their own lack of accountability.

Wagner was not one of those CEOs; he hired Bob Lutz to come to his company to revive product development efforts that had grown stodgy as well as subject to bureaucratic infighting. Wagner saw Lutz, a veteran product man and once the number two executive at Chrysler, as someone with skills he did not have – a sixth sense for product design and performance. Lutz was also charismatic and an automotive media darling, and his good looks, ex-fighter pilot background, and superb track record further solidified his appeal. Together they have revitalized company.

What Wagner has done, and Kerry appears to be doing, is what every leader must do: surround oneself with the best and brightest talent, even if that means being less in the

spotlight. But let's be realistic. You don't aspire to become a chief executive – presidential or corporate – without a certain desire to make headlines. By nature many leaders are aggressive, dominant, and power-centric. Yet, as Wagner has shown, there are organizational benefits to sharing power.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes Level 5 leaders – self-aware, self-fulfilled, and other-directed – as those who prefer being backstage rather than onstage. Darwin Smith of Kimberly Clark was more comfortable with others getting credit; organizational success was more important to him than individual kudos. Frances Hesselbein, former CEO of the Girl Scouts and now chair of the Leader to Leader Institute, speaks of good leaders as those who are surrounded by diverse, innovative talent.

Drawing Others into the Limelight

What these “out of the spotlight” leaders possess is a strong sense of self as well as an ability to engage with others in ways that enrich others; they makes others feel competent to perform a task and excited to do it. Such leaders connect with people in ways that make them feel good about getting things done. Here are some ways they do it:

Reach for the stars. One of the mistakes that leaders make is underselling the vision.

Visions by nature are big, bold, and brassy. As predictors of the future, they should be designed to excite the imagination and capture the heart and mind of others.

Share the spotlight. Visions are inert without the active participation of others. A leader who views the future as a play with parts for all the “actors” in the company will have a better opportunity of getting things done. Many local arts organizations are prime examples: their success comes in part from the joint effort of those behind the scenes with those playing the “leading” roles on stage.

Learn from failure. Mistakes are not the end of the world, although we sometimes treat them as such. Organizations that build great talent around the top leaders – from the Marines to Jet Blue – are those that see missteps as opportunities to further develop the talent.

Leadership is not for the faint of heart. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen as president Harry Truman used to say. Leaders, especially presidents and CEOs, rise to positions of prominence because they not only like the heat, they do not like the cold. In other words, they only become fully engaged and energized when the stakes are high.

But there is a price to pay: taking too much heat – and grabbing too much limelight – can both burn and blind. Those who push others to front of the stage to share the spotlight will better avoid both the burns and the blindness.

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