LOWER LIGHT LEADERSHIP

Clear Values Reveal Real Value

Clel Zeigler

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In this article today, I decided to maybe get a little more personal with some of my more honest thoughts about leadership, values, and business.

For those who read the full article, I hope to make it worth it by sharing a few thoughts on how to gain some clarity around your own values in life to help you lead forward with more clarity and alignment on your core values.

Before we get to those tips, though, let's get my frustration expressed first.

Quality leadership is hard work. It is not a cakewalk, and anyone who thinks it is easy, I would challenge them by asking if they are really leading, or are they managing?

There is a difference, and yes, there is some crossover, but they are fundamentally different at their core.

A management orientation is self-centered and can be summed up by defining the approach as, "Do what I say or else." The manager cares more about accolades, promotions, attention, rigidity, and linear approaches because that is what keeps things predictable and safe. You lean into policies, procedures, and rules as a way to dehumanize the experience of enforcing actions that impact others entrusted to your responsibility.

And this is where I think we have to be careful, because dehumanizing people in business does not always look cruel on the surface. Sometimes it looks organized, efficient, measurable, and professional. It happens when we stop seeing people as people and start seeing them only through the lens of productivity, absences, tardies, hours on the clock, direct reports, KPIs, payroll lines, or any other name that creates distance between the human being and the line on a spreadsheet. Those things may need to be measured, but when they become the primary way we see people, we start managing numbers instead of leading human beings. We lose sight that behind every data point is a real person with a real life, real pressures, real potential, and real responsibility entrusted to our care.

Leadership, on the other hand, invites others to act, take initiative, try, fail, and try again. If we were to look at one of the most influential leaders in history to understand leadership, we may best define it by the words of Jesus Christ when He said, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

No threat, no force, simply an invitation that allows for choice.

This is part of why leadership is work. Leadership is not hard because it requires a physical workout. It is hard because you are engaged in the work of growing a person. You are engaging with them in a way that draws out the best they have to offer, and you are doing it without force. That requires patience, direct and sometimes tough conversations, acknowledgment, validation, celebration, championing, correction, and support.

And if it is real leadership, all of that comes from a place of love and support because you see how capable that individual is and how much they have to offer. At the same time, you are also remembering that this person has a life beyond the role they fill at work. They may be carrying pressures at home, responsibilities with family, obligations with school, personal challenges, or any number of unseen things that shape how they show up.

That does not mean standards disappear. It means you keep seeing the person while holding the standard.

That is the work of leadership. It is the work of treating humans as humans, capable of greatness, change, ownership, and growth, while also remembering they are on their own life journey.

Leaders are engaged in the work of growing the leader within others, while managers are engaged in only growing themselves. Leaders are dedicated to the cause, while managers are dedicated to the establishment. What I mean by that is leaders are motivated by something bigger than the organization itself, while managers, when operating from a management orientation, are often motivated by becoming bigger inside the organization.

Now, I am not saying leaders toss out the rule book with an “anything goes” attitude. Far from it, but this is where we see the real work of leadership, maintaining the balance of allowing space for individuality and innovation while holding boundaries that permit forward progress instead of destructive chaos.

How is this to be done? How do we hold boundaries while permitting flexibility for innovation and creativity that does not turn into favoritism, popularity bias, or spineless permissiveness?

The answer is this: understanding, living, and clearly communicating your values, mission, and vision.

I will save mission and vision for another time and zero in on values today because our values should be our first filter to run decisions through, because the means should never be justified by the end result.

This is one area in business that frustrates me. It is as if values are important until we enter the business arena, and then they are merely PR slogans rather than firm standards.

Companies that are not clear on their values, or are clear on paper about what their values are but whose internal behavior or decisions do not align, create opportunity for

workplace toxicity to breed, weaken leadership, and promote incentive to embrace a manager mindset instead of a leadership orientation.

For a time, the company may get by and even appear to flourish, but inwardly the lifeblood of the company begins to succumb to the toxin present so that the organization is dying from the inside out. Eventually, a heavy blow is struck, and the integrity needed to withstand such a hit is missing, leaving the company in a severe state.

Leading with values is not “soft” leadership. It is work, lonely at times, and requires patience, but the long-term rewards are priceless.

What are the perks then?

Well, decision-making becomes much simpler. Roy Disney is credited with stating, “It’s not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are.” You will not lose a wink of sleep at night keeping yourself in good conscience with your decisions. Your reputation will sustain critical relationships, and in life and business, relationships matter. You will attract top talent and individuals with shared values to your organization. Life will feel more fulfilling and meaningful.

Given time, I am sure we could get an extensive list, but suffice it to say that in business, you can count on longevity and an upward trajectory over time.

Alright, for those of you still with me in reading this, let’s talk about identifying our values, and then I will share a few more thoughts to wrap up.

Tip 1. This came from Brené Brown. She said most people have about two core values to which adjoining values can be connected. Now, I will say this: I thought long and hard, and I could only get my list narrowed to four that I felt were distinct enough to be individual, yet still remaining connected with one another. So I would say you can get a list somewhere in the ballpark of two to four. Anything more than four, and you are probably splitting hairs.

Tip 2. I was once told that your core values are those lines you will never cross. I beg to differ. Being human, we are going to make mistakes and, at times, make choices that do not match our values. So if you try to find your core values by that definition, you are going to come up shorthanded.

What I found to be a much more helpful trick was asking myself, “What am I willing to sacrifice for?” This was more helpful to me because now I was not trying to figure out what line I had never crossed, but rather which lines I drew more frequently.

Tip 3. Do not worry about making these flashy, poetic, or complicated. Instead, make them you.

Now, value discovery is a process, not an event. They are there for sure, but we need to get still, reflect, and pay attention. You might find that you change your two to four core values a handful of times before you land on what feels exactly right for you, and that is

okay. Many of us are not used to being in tune with ourselves, and it can take time. Lean in, trust the process, and do not rush it.

Tip 4. Make your core values your filter in life. Let them filter your thinking, decisions, and behavior. You will find life to be more rewarding, meaningful, and peaceful when you act in alignment with your values.

And then practice living by them.

At first, this may feel feeble. You may know your values clearly and still feel awkward, hesitant, or inconsistent when it comes time to actually set boundaries, make decisions, or hold yourself to those standards. But like a muscle, resolve strengthens with time, consistency, and use. The more you practice drawing those lines, honoring those standards, and course-correcting when you drift, the stronger your reflexes become. Over time, living by your values becomes less like something you are trying to remember and more like the natural way you move through life.

Now, some final thoughts.

As I said earlier, we are capable of not acting in alignment with our core values, even when we know them clearly. When that happens, learn from the experience and make a course correction to realign. The sooner you do, the sooner you will feel at peace again, and that deviation will become a life lesson to springboard you forward if you embrace the lesson.

For companies that are not clear on their values, or not acting in alignment with their values, I invite you to do the work now to clarify and live by these values. To be clear, this does not mean an organization should be watching people's personal lives to see if their private values perfectly match the company's values. That is not the point. The point is that behavior inside the organization should align with the values the organization claims to uphold.

For example, if a company says one of its values is love and compassion, but an employee who is great at the technical parts of the job continues to gossip, spread rumors, tear others down, or create distrust among the team, then the issue is not whether that person is "good" or "bad." The issue is that their behavior is not supporting the values of the organization. If they are unwilling to change that behavior after clear expectations, accountability, and opportunity to grow, then they may need to be let go.

For employees who find themselves in companies that permit, support, or sustain behaviors that do not align with your values, I would ask: are you truly happy there, or are you there simply to get your paycheck and get home? If it is the latter, how would life change for you if you sought employment from an organization that shared your values? How would your attitude toward going to work change if you found a place you enjoyed being? How would you be different during the hours you are not at work? If you made choices based on alignment instead of fear, what would you set out to change in your life?

Whether you are leading a company, working inside one, building a team, or deciding what kind of organization you want to give your time and energy to, your values should become a filter. They should help clarify who is hired, who is promoted, who is corrected, and at times, who can no longer remain in the company. They should also help you discern where you belong, what you are willing to tolerate, and what kind of work environment you want to help build or be part of.

Lead with upholding your values, and you can begin to rely on governing your teams and your life with correct principles rather than demanding compliance through fear.

Leadership is work. You are engaged in the work of growing people, not organizations or empires. The growth of those things is simply a byproduct of growing your people first.

So maybe the question to sit with is this:

Are the values you claim becoming the life, leadership, and work culture you are actually building?