

# Creating Contagious Leadership

## by John Hersey

### Chapter 5- Habit #4: Looking to Greatness

Looking to greatness: The habit of emphasizing strengths.
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In sports, we hear debate after debate about the greatest team of all time, and the Boston Celtics are always included in the conversation. When I was growing up in southern New Hampshire in the sixties, following the Boston Celtics was my favorite pastime. And, believe it or not, it was the Celtics who first taught me about character, authenticity, attitude, contribution, commitment, determination, discipline, drive, embracing change, focus, integrity, motivation, creating possibility, risk, and emphasizing strengths.

Red Auerbach, then the head coach and general manager for the Celtics, was a master craftsman. He had an amazing talent for assembling groups of individual players who all knew the role they were supposed to play, were willing to play that role, and were passionately committed to one thing and one thing only—winning championships. During his tenure, Auerbach led the Celtics to eight consecutive NBA Championship seasons and nine championships in all. He seemed to do this by focusing on the strengths of each player and allowing them to be the best they could be by looking to their greatness. Oh, sure, the Celtics had a few stars like Bill Russell, Bob Cousy and Sam Jones, but most of the players were role players. They were all good players, just not stars. Some of them had played for other teams with average results. But when they came together as members of the Boston Celtics, they became champions. All because Red Auerbach was willing to understand each player's strengths, and then relentlessly focused on those strengths. Auerbach never much cared that Bill Russell didn't score the most points because he wasn't a scorer- he was a defensive and rebounding genius. Tom Sanders was perhaps the greatest defensive forward in the league during his time with the Celtics. Auerbach never tried to make Sanders into a flashy, high scoring forward. He just wanted him to be the best

defensive forward on the floor, every night. As he assembled championship team after championship team, Auerbach focused his attention on two things: First, it was imperative that every player was a team player. Second, he focused on their strengths and didn't spend a single minute trying to get his players to be something they were not. Red Auerbach was a Contagious Leader.

Contained Leaders have a habit of trying to move ahead by pushing people down; focusing on what's wrong, not what's right; pointing out weaknesses not strengths. Sure, we can always do better and improve, but sometimes Contained Leaders focus so much attention on improving weaknesses that they don't spend nearly enough time fine-tuning strengths.

Let me give you another sports analogy: When I was a kid, I was a terrific baseball player. My dad always thought I could play in the majors as a catcher. Although I was right-handed, I always hit as a lefty. Don't ask me why or how it happened. I don't even remember. All I knew was that I could hit, consistently and with power, as a left-hander.

When I was in junior high school, my coach came up with this great idea that I should be a switch-hitter. That means I would hit left-handed when the pitcher was right-handed and right-handed when the pitcher was a lefty. They say it's easier to see the ball when you hit this way. At any rate, I was doing fine as a lefty, but the coach had me practice hitting right-handed every day. The end result was that I never did become much of a right-handed hitter, and my skills as a left-handed hitter diminished over time as I practiced to overcome a weakness rather than improving my strength.

Contagious Leaders take a completely different view. The goal of a Contagious Leader is to help each person become the best they can be, not to change them. For sure, the Contagious Leader is mindful of improving weak areas, but that is different than changing someone. The Contagious Leader takes the time to really get to know each person- their strengths and their weaknesses- and then holds them accountable for being the best they can be. Looking to greatness involves four steps:

## **Step 1. Know your people.**

As we said in Chapter 1, it's amazing how little most Contained Leaders know about the personal lives of the people they work with. On the business side, most Contained Leaders don't have a clue as to the real strengths of most of the people reporting to them. Contagious Leaders know about their employees' education, technical skills, behavioral style, and values.

Knowing your people doesn't have to involve any uncomfortable or sophisticated systems. In many cases, you can just ask employees what they think their strengths are. Having real conversations with people can produce amazing results.

The educational and technical information is generally available on the person's resume. Study it, pay attention to it, and let it guide you. Generally speaking, the fact that your person studied English Literature as an undergraduate and graduate student may be a good indication that their strength lies in areas other than accounting or engineering. There are exceptions to every rule or generalization, of course, so you'll need to be careful. But get in the habit of talking to people—you'll be amazed what you learn.

As for behavior and values, I recommend that you use some form of profiles or assessment tools. My clients always benefit greatly from the use of these instruments. It is the only way I know to be clear on whether the employee and company or department is culturally compatible. Furthermore, I don't know of a better way to enhance interpersonal communication than using the results of our *Managing for Success*<sup>TM</sup> Behavioral and Values Profiles. I have even used these successfully in my own company to help drive interaction, creativity and communication. Through these profiles we learned that my strength is my ability to inspire others and conduct my affairs in a stable and dependable nature. My wife Beverly, on the other hand, is more of a driver, more results-oriented, more directed. Beverly is also more comfortable operating in a fast-paced environment with lots of change than I am.

For several years, we have used the *Managing for Success™* System to help clients understand the strengths of individuals and teams. Our clients have successfully used these tools in several strategic areas:

- Improving hiring decisions by identifying people who are not just technically qualified but also, and perhaps more importantly, culturally compatible with the organization.
- Improving communications and leadership development by identifying and focusing on the behavioral strengths of individuals.
- Increasing sales productivity and customer care by helping individuals in these areas to communicate in a manner that is consistent with the customer/prospect behavioral style.

Using the *Managing for Success™* Profile is like playing with a two-piece puzzle. The first piece is **behavior**. The second piece is **why**—why we behave the way we do, what drives us. These profiles help companies select, manage, train, communicate with and empower the right people for each position. The profiles are administered online and take about 20 minutes to complete. The system then delivers, within three minutes, over 30 pages of information to help the individual and manager understand themselves and others at a level you never thought possible. The net result is a deep insight into how individuals behave and what drives their behavior.

By knowing each other better, my wife and I have been able to honor each other's strengths instead of working at defending our own ways of doing things. We will never, ever do things the same way. But when we focus on strengths and look to each other's greatness, we don't have to be right. We just have to be effective. These same benefits will accrue to any organization using these incredibly powerful tools.

## **Step 2. Integrate character.**

Character will do more to alter the culture of your company than most anything else you can do. My friend Ian Percy, another wonderful speaker and author, once said to me that the next big trend in business will be ethics. That was before all the scandals

and corporate malfeasances of 2002. Character and ethics are very close cousins. As Jean Paul Richter once observed: “Never does a man [or woman] portray his own character more vividly than in his manner of portraying another.”

So character may well be the next big trend. We have evolved to a place where we need to remind ourselves that the only way to instill character in the workplace is to model it every day, in everything we do.

### **Step 3. Become a mentor.**

Permission mentoring will be covered in Chapter 10 but let me go ahead and say that looking to greatness requires a different view of ourselves. We must see ourselves as mentors, not bosses. As Jack Welch put it, “We have to take out the boss element. We’re going to win on our ideas, not by whips and chains.” The Contained Leader tells individuals what to do and, more often than not, how to do it. The Contagious Leader creates an agreement on the desired outcome of a program or project and then supports the individual or team to accomplish the outcome, within the desired timeframe, using their strengths. There is no bossing involved. The Contagious Leader is a mentor, supporting the individual.

### **Step 4. Hold people accountable.**

Looking to greatness may, at first glance, seem familiar to the “open marriages” we read about in the 60s and early 70s when it was perfectly OK to do whatever you wanted as long as you were being true to yourself. The Contagious Leader does not abide by such a loose definition. Rather, they identify a person’s strengths and then hold them accountable for delivering on that strength every day. Once you internalize this, it becomes clear that looking to greatness requires the Contagious Leader to hold people to high standards- standards the individual has set. Contagious Leadership is hard work. Letting people off the hook, lowering the high bar, allowing them to perform to the lowest common denominator, is simple. It is also the way of Contained Leaders.

The benefits of looking to greatness are many. First, you’ll experience a cultural shift as others model the habit. It is just more enjoyable focusing attention on what we are terrific at than on

overcoming weaknesses. Try it with your family, particularly if you have children. For the most part, we have been incessantly reminding our kids of their weaknesses since birth. We put more energy into making them better math students than improving their natural strengths as artists. It is sad what this does. Ask a third grader to draw a picture of a purple elephant, and they'll sit right down and knock out the most amazing purple elephant you have ever seen. Ask them to do the same assignment as a fifth grader, and they will likely tell you that elephants are not purple. Ask them as a high-school freshman, and they'll say they are not much of an artist.

Looking to greatness also has a way of focusing attention on what is possible. Over time it builds confidence and trust and reduces conflict. We become accepting of the contribution that each team member is capable of making, and we slowly eliminate the need to be right. Championships are won by teams working together, not individuals dedicated to personal achievement. Championships are won, every day, when we look to greatness.