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John Baldoni

For nearly 20 years, John Baldoni has helped executives from entrepreneurial start ups to Fortune 100 companies to help them develop their communications, learning and leadership skills.

*The author of two books on leadership, **Personal Leadership, Taking Control of Your Work Life** and **180 Ways to Walk the Leadership Talk**, he has written more than three dozen articles, essays and commentaries on leadership. He consults on management development at the University of Michigan, and is a former commentator for Michigan Radio's "Life, Leadership and Laughter," which he created. He is also a highly sought speaker. His most popular topics are the qualities of personal leadership and the importance of leadership communications.*



A graduate, with honors, from the University of Michigan's Master's program in organizational behavior and adult instruction, Baldoni is also holds degrees from Georgetown University and London International Film School.

*Further information on the author/speaker can be found at his award-winning website, **Leadership Communications for the 21st Century** at <http://www.lc21.com/>.*

Q.John, you speak many leaders in your consulting with various corporations and businesses. What are the most significant changes you have seen during the past year in leadership?

A.The focus on results! Any time you have a downturn in the economy, senior leadership feels an urgency to make things happen. Effective leadership, of course, is about getting results. So I have seen more emphasis on developing men and women leaders who know how to get things done. Over the past decade there has been a strong push toward developing leaders at all levels. Much of this is due to the need for rapid decision-making in response to global business trends. My guess is that successful organizations will not only keep this development effort going, they will accelerate it. You can never have enough good leadership.

Q.In your book **Personal Leadership**, you discuss 10 key. If you had to select one of the 10 (character, vision, strategy, time management, communications, recognition, emotional intelligence, change leadership,

reflection, supervision) which ONE would you say is the most important to becoming an effective leader?

A. Communications is probably the single most important leadership attribute. There is likely some bias in my answer since I do quite a bit of work in communications, but communications does seem essential to accomplishing everything a leader does. For example, vision is essential to leadership. A leader must possess a firm sense of where she wants to take the organization. Nothing will happen with that vision without the commitment of others in the organization. How will you persuade others of the vision and its imperatives? By communicating, of course. Keep in mind communications is far more than talking out loud. A big part of communications is listening, enabling others to contribute their ideas, opinions, and suggestions. Take recognition, for instance. Recognition involves acknowledging the contributions of others. To do that you need to communicate. Communications is also part of one's emotional intelligence. You need to have the interpersonal skills to get along with others. Communications is part of that. Communications even plays a role in reflection – after all, reflection involves self-dialogue, listening to one's inner self as a means of self-discovery. Bottom line, communications is a core leadership competency.

Q. Your focus is upon personal leadership first. Tell us why.

A. To me, personal leadership is central to leadership and accessible to everyone. Few of us will become presidents of organizations or CEOs of companies, yet all of us have the ability to become “personal leaders.”

I define personal leadership as moving from the “I can” to the “I will.” When it comes to doing something – be it professional like coaching another individual, or personal like community service -- many of us can do something, but the question becomes, will we?

Personal leadership involves three things: 1. Autonomy – the willingness to be in charge – at least of ourselves; 2. Initiative – the willingness to make a positive difference; and 3. Responsibility – the willingness to be accountable for actions and results.

Q. You mentioned a recent Peter Drucker article that had greatly impressed you. What was the gist of it and the importance for leaders today?

A. I have read much Drucker and consider him the single most influential influence on management, as we know it.

In one recent article, “Managing Oneself” [Harvard Business Review, 3/1/99], Drucker wrote about the way we process information. Some do it through reflection, others through dialogue. Others do it by writing. I fall into the later category. I think things out as I write and it was reassuring to me to find that others, perhaps even Drucker himself, do the same.

Self-knowledge is essential to leadership. After all, who of us wants a leader who does not know himself? At the same time, leadership self-knowledge is a voyage of discovery. We need to learn how we are affecting those whom we lead. That's why good leaders always want feedback. As Ed Koch, former mayor of New York City, used to say, “How am I doing?” Leaders need to learn what others think of their actions.

And if there is dissonance between leader and follower the leader needs to find a way to reach out and bridge the difference. That does not mean giving up, or

betraying principle, it simply means trying new things, or communicating differently.

Q. Describe your unique Leading Aloud model.

A. Leading aloud begins with thinking ahead. PR professionals counsel their clients to think about the message they want to convey. Same applies to leaders. Preparation involves being clear in what you want to say and then practice saying it. What's more, leaders need to learn to repeat their message. The temptation is to think that people have heard you say it before. So what? As a leader you need to communicate the vision and it needs to be stated over and over again -- hundreds of times and in hundreds of different situations -- big meetings, small meetings, 1:1 conversations and so forth.

Part of leading aloud involves listening. If your mouth is always flapping, you cannot judge how your message is getting through. Likewise, make the message palatable. People relate to stories -- personal and historical. Tell them. Also get the body involved. Look like you mean what you say. This involves a degree of acting. So what? It works. And finally do not take yourself too seriously. Use humor when you can -- especially when you can tell stories at the expense of yourself. It makes the leader seem like one of us and people like that.

By the way, author-consultant Terry Pearce wrote a wonderful book on this topic entitled, *Leading Out Loud* (Jossey-Bass, 1995). I recommend it highly for anyone interested in the topic further.

Q. Leadership Emotional Intelligence, a term popularized by Daniel Goleman, is becoming increasingly importance in a time of flatter hierarchies and increasing multi-tasking of even top execs. Tell us about your Self-Awareness model and how you utilize it in coaching leaders toward increased emotional intelligence.

A. Leader coaches need to have a highly developed sense of emotional intelligence. Not only must be self-aware, as Goleman says, they need to be able to get along with others, show empathy for differences, and keep their own emotions in check. Leaders with a highly developed sense of EQ naturally create a supportive environment where people want to do well. This is how to motivate people -- create the conditions for them to succeed.

It should be pointed out that emotional intelligence is not the same as being soft. After all, it's been said many times that the "soft stuff is always the hardest." Leaders need to set high expectations for others and live by core values themselves. Firm resolve in practicing those expectations and values is an absolute. Firmness, however, is not the same as meanness. It is perfectly appropriate for a leader, especially when she is coaching, to be empathetic and understanding. That's not being "soft" -- that's being human!

Q. In your book *Personal Leadership*, you state, "it is axiomatic that we live in an era of change; what may not be so clear is the fact that we must "change the way we change." Tell us what you are teaching today's leaders about change.

Change is organic to our lives as individuals and as a society. Just as our bodies change from birth through death, organizations experience similar life stages. Yet as inherent as change is, many of us resist it. In fact, I read recently that Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who has written so insightfully about change within organizations, said she doesn't like change either.

So it falls to the leader to prepare people for change – to be the clarion voice in the wilderness signaling the way forward. Like John the Baptist, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others did in their time.

Leaders must let people know that change is coming. Rather than fear it they should embrace it and make it work to their advantage. This is a matter of altering the organizational mindset so that instead of dreading change, people learn to welcome it. How can leaders do this? By communicating the opportunities that come with change. Companies like Nokia, Sony and Ideo whose very existence depends upon creating new products that shape or ride waves of change are very good at developing this mindset.

Q.In your book, you feature several essays (nine profiles) on “How Others Lead.” Which of those featured leaders best exemplifies to you our website’s dedication “to develop ethical, effective leaders”?

A. All of the men and women I profile in the book are examples of ethical leadership. Let me cite two examples.

Eleanor Josaitis, co-founder and executive director of Focus: Hope, a social service agency in Detroit, is a shining example of selfless leadership over a lifetime. Here we have a woman who has dedicated her life to bettering the human condition. In the late 1960s in the wake of the riots that tore apart the city of Detroit, Eleanor resolved to do something to help. She had all of the excuses not to get involved. She was white; she was married; and she was the mother of five. Life had been good to her. It would have been so easy to look the other way. Not Eleanor!

Together with Father William Cunningham she resolved to make a positive difference and she has. Thirty years later, Focus: Hope is going strong and so is Eleanor, now a grandmother as well as a role model to thousands of men and women whose lives she has influenced. Red Berenson, coach of the University of Michigan hockey team, is another example of ethical leadership. His coaching career is all about developing the abilities of young men on and off ice, including excellence in the classroom. His personal success as a NHL player and coach (including a Stanley Cup), two NCAA titles as Michigan’s coach, plus earning undergraduate and graduate degrees from Michigan, gives him a platform to reach out to young players.

A school like Michigan will attract the best physical players. Red sees his challenge as helping to mold them into student athletes who will have the skills to succeed in the classroom and more importantly the skills to exceed in life after hockey. Red has coached his share of players who have gone on to have careers in pro hockey, but at the same time he has coached players who have gone to medical school, graduate school, and even the Peace Corps. It says a great deal about the integrity and ethics of a collegiate coach when his players succeed off the field of play. Red’s do.

Q.What led to your career specialty in leadership?

A.My interest in leadership has emerged over two decades of working with men and women leaders in all walks of life, in both business and nonprofits. The more I work with leaders the more convinced I become that leadership is salient difference between organizations that thrive and survive and those that wither and die.

Personally, I derive the most satisfaction in working with emerging leaders. They are hungry for information and eager to learn. Most often they know what to do,

they just need to be pointed in the right direction. And if I can have some little influence in the pointing, it's very gratifying.

Q. There is a great deal of discussion in leadership development circles about the role of leader-teachers. What's your experience with them?

A. One of the most effective ways leaders can develop their own skills as well as the skills of others is through teaching. Being a teacher is at once a humbling experience – the challenging of relating what you know – coupled with an exhilarating experience of helping a new leader to grow and develop. The leader-teacher model is one that Ford's Leadership Development Center uses to great success. Ford, like other organizations, has discovered that the leader-teachers have the credibility outsiders lack as well as the inside knowledge of how to get things done inside the organization.

Q. What do you think is the biggest challenge for new leaders?

A. The thrill of being in charge and the fear of being in charge! So often newly promoted managers think they need to keep doing their old jobs as well as "telling" everyone else what they need to do, too. Not so! The biggest lesson that emerging leaders learn is how to "lead by letting go." In other words, leaders must learn to set expectations, provide assistance when asked, and let people do their jobs, only intervening when necessary. A leader's success will depend upon the ability to achieve results through the actions of others.

Q. When all is said and done what do effective leaders do best?

A. They provide the support their people need to succeed. Sometimes support will be more resources, an extra hand, or some assistance in networking. Other times it will be to act as an advisor, or a problem solver. So often support really involves teaching and coaching. You can boil all of this down to two words: involvement and engagement – involvement in the needs and wants of your people and engagement in actions to help them succeed.