

How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches
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By Amiel Handelsman

Leaders want to be loved What's so wrong with that?

Over the past year I received similar introductions to five bright executives in different organizations. Before each assignment began, I was cautioned, "(S)he's very hard-nosed. Doesn't like touchy-feely. We advise you focus on business outcomes. No soft stuff."

In each situation, I took this advice with several grains of salt. In fact, you might say I ignored it entirely. Sure, the coaching focused on outcomes at each stage of the program. I don't know any other way to do it. But it also included the soft stuff—quite a bit of it—and the results were universally positive.

In all five instances, I began the first face-to-face meeting by asking these executives to tell me (among other things) what gets them out of bed in the morning and what keeps them up at night. All of these "hard-nosed" leaders

answered the questions and did so in a way that felt real to me. I learned about the twists and turns in their careers, their early role models, the causes they cherish, the people (and pets) who matter most to them, and the disappointments and anxieties that eat away at them.

This set a precedent for all subsequent conversations—and for coaching as a whole. All five leaders not only were open to the "soft stuff." They ate it up. Consider these numbers:

- 5 of 5 spoke with passion about why they do what they do
- 5 of 5 talked openly about events that nagged at their crew
- 5 of 5 told me about broken relationships they were consciously mending
- 4 of 5 brought up the ways they were practicing new ways of speaking and listening at home and with their families

- 3 of 5 regularly did self-observation exercises about what they were feeling and how this showed up in their bodies
- 2 of 5 gave me at least one hug
- 2 of 5 cried at least twice during our meetings
- 0 of 5 told me the conversations were too personal
- 0 of 5 indicated a preference to talk about revenues and costs rather than people, relationships and emotions

What's going on here? How is it that people supposedly averse to the "soft stuff" end up accepting it and even yearning for it?

My answer: leaders long to be treated as human beings. They want to be seen and appreciated for all of who they are. Not just a box on an organizational chart. Not just someone responsible for X dollars or Y number of people. And not even as someone strong on these five competencies and weak on those five.

In short, leaders want to be loved. Not just at home. Not just from family and close friends. But from the people they spend thousands of hours with every year: their colleagues at work.

For the past fifteen years, I have been learning how to love leaders. It's different from the way I love my wife, my 92-year-old grandmother, my parents, and my siblings. It's also distinct from how I love my closest friends. Yet, in some ways, it's not so different.

Because—the point bears repeating—leaders are human beings. They are complex. Every moment at work (and every moment not at work) they carry with them stories of who they have been and who they hope to be. They bring a set of commitments (what they intend to bring forth in the world) and immediate concerns (what's in their face right now). And they live in bodies that hold these stories, commitments, and concerns.

When do leaders feel loved? When all of these different dimensions of themselves are accepted and honored. When they feel safe revealing the things they assume others don't want to hear or can't be trusted with knowing.

My intent as a coach is to create a space where leaders can bring together different parts of themselves. I feel grateful that this happens as often as it does. Yet part of me also wishes that

the relationship I have with my clients were not necessary—or at least not unique. Wouldn't it be nice if work were a place where we could show up without embarrassment or apology as our full, messy, beautiful selves? Wouldn't it be nice if the most successful companies, governments, and not-for-profits were known to be successful precisely because they offered the conditions for this to occur?

There are two main reasons I coach executives, who comprise only a small portion of all organizations. One is that this is where the money is. The second is a hope that my clients will so enjoy being seen fully as human beings that they will feel compelled to offer this experience to others. Although everyone can do this, executives are uniquely positioned to because of their visibility and decision-making span.

Let me close with a poem:

Leaders want to be loved.
We all want to be loved.
And when you get right down to it,
Once we feel loved
We realize something else:

We long to love others.

Because that's what makes us happy
That's what makes us fully human
And,
Research tells us
That's what makes our organizations thrive.
In short, love is profitable.

More on the amygdala A correction from the April issue

You're probably thinking I misspelled amygdala in last month's issue. Nice guess, but we got that part right.

Janet Crawford writes the following about the connection between the amygdala and anxiety:

"Anxiety doesn't originate from amygdala hijacking. Rather, anxiety creates amygdala warming, which, if it becomes strong enough, can lead to a hijack. Anxiety is the cause of the hijack, not the result of it. The origins of anxiety include real danger, imagined danger, certain brain dysfunctions, and the brain's

built-in system for resisting change. Because our brains send anxiety signals (from the basal ganglia) to the amygdala when we try something new, it's important to know that change will create anxiety and to have coping mechanisms to soothe our stress response so that it doesn't get in the way of useful learning and growth."

Janet is an executive coach based in the Bay Area who has integrated an understanding of brain science into her work. Thank you, Janet!

Warm regards,

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