

# A LEADERSHIP CAROL: A CLASSIC TALE FOR THE CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACE

*by Jim Dittmar and John Stanko*

Ineffective leadership and dysfunctional organizations are as old as recorded time. Those of us who are familiar with the life and work of Frances Hesselbein and the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum wish it were not so, but even today, many leaders and their organizations don't "serve to live" and therefore greatly underperform in terms of what they could be and do. Our latest book, *A Leadership Carol*, serves to contribute our solution to this age-old dilemma.

The book is a light-hearted adaptation of Charles Dickens's novella, *A Christmas Carol*. The story revolves around Ben Holiday, who inherited the leadership of his fourth-generation family business. Before long, the business and Ben are in crisis. When Ben's desperate efforts to turn things around fail, he receives some unexpected help in a most unusual manner, and comes to grips with his own leadership limitations as he seeks to save the company he loves.

As Ben confronts his leadership failures, a series of visitors help him grasp power in a development model, represented by the acronym L.E.A.D.E.R.S., that imparts timeless and important lessons relevant for his modern leadership challenges. The L.E.A.D.E.R.S. development model represents our effort to capture and preserve the many insights into leadership development content and methodology that we have gained through more than 50 combined years of teaching, training, coaching, and mentoring leaders from all walks of life.

The process of writing the book started in an offsite classroom where we taught graduate students from Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. We knew we wanted to write something, but had not yet decided on what or how to write. Having been deeply influenced by Ken Blanchard, Pat Lencioni, and others who had used fables and stories as a vehicle to deliver their leadership lessons, we concluded that we would do the same thing. It was just after the Christmas season; we talked about the classic book *A Christmas Carol* and discussed how many leadership lessons it contained. We then decided to use Dickens's story as the model for creating our own, more contemporary storyline.

We began envisioning how Dickens's tale could fit into today's context. Little by little, we discovered ways in which we could adapt aspects of his story outline into ours. At one point in this process, we described our effort as "a light-hearted adaptation of Dickens's novella, *A Christmas Carol*, that teaches timeless and important leadership lessons for today." We wanted to avoid having the storyline overwhelm or overshadow the important leadership principles we were describing, so we tried to keep the story simple and credible while supportive of the leadership model we were presenting.

As we considered the organization for the story, we wanted to create a company whose services included some that would add a controversial element to the story. Therefore, we decided on an organization in the business of security and surveillance. That topic had not been in the news recently, but still arouses a response among people who think someone may be spying on them. The company, a family-owned business, was founded by people who were good leaders in many respects, particularly in how they treated people both internally and externally.

Once we determined the nature of the company, we now needed a Scrooge-like character to be the primary focus of the story. Ben Holiday is the CEO of his family's company (named AWSS), and his name derived from *eBENEzer* in Dickens's story. Since consultants play a role for many companies in their

leadership development, we decided to replace the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, with consultants who would address leadership issues, good and bad, past, present, and future. Also, we wanted to show that the spirit of the company's founders, as expressed in the company's vision and values, had guided the company well over the years and was the source of the company's recovery.

A consultant character was a useful one for us, and Francis, the consultant hired to evaluate Ben's company, was developed. Francis generated a controversial report after spending a week or two with the company, and this report was the source of Ben's conflict and search for answers. We allude to the report throughout the story, and then include it in its entirety as an addendum.

In Francis's fictional report, we present our leadership model and explain how that model could and should play out in real life. The consultants (spirits) of leadership past, present, and future who visit Ben's home also reference the report to explain the critical issues that are destroying the company, debilitating the people, and having a negative impact on the community where the business was originally founded.

## The Model

When Ben assumes the leadership of AWSS, he discounts the company's legacy and vision given to him by his predecessors and proceeds to create his own little world of nastiness through his poor leadership practices. That causes the company to take a dive, and we used that to make the connection between effective leadership and company performance. When Ben violates that vision, the spirits of the company's founders work to call him back to the foundation that had been laid before he took over.

With these basic components in place, we were ready to share our insights about effective leadership. To portray Ben's shortcomings as a leader, which we felt were common to leadership in general, we developed what we now refer to as the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. developmental model. Each letter signifies a dimension of leadership,

and the model as a whole characterizes what is necessary for any leader to be effective.

The first letter L stands for *leadership*. We believe leadership is fundamentally characterized as relational; as Ken Blanchard has noted in his 2016 post “*Leadership is a Partnership*,” “Leadership is not something you do to people. It’s something you do with people.” Consequently, leadership is a process of influence between leadership and followers that occurs because of and through genuine relationships. Leadership is also about transformation and change. Effective leadership results in change, both for those involved and the organizations they lead.

The first E in the model stands for *ethics*. Many people equate good leadership with ethical leadership. Without an ethical framework and commitment to establish and maintain ethical standards and behaviors, problems will eventually occur in any organization. One of the things we emphasize in this aspect is that the way leaders treat people is just as important ethically as the leader’s financial and fiduciary responsibilities. If leaders are unethical in the way they lead people, the way they treat others, the way they structure people’s jobs, or the way people are rewarded, it goes back to what we mentioned under the letter L for leadership: It’s a relational issue, and that can have ethical and performance ramifications. We try to show that this is where Ben was off the mark—in the way he treated people, and we see that kind of behavior not just as poor leadership but also as an ethical violation.

The letter A stands for the concept of *alignment*. Alignment is important because people must understand the meaning, value, and purpose of their work. When they are aligned, team members understand how their work activities contribute to the fulfillment of the vision, mission, and goals of the organization. When people understand how their daily work aligns with the organization’s vision and mission, that understanding contributes positively to organizational performance and achievement. This happens because team members then draw on their own experience and creativity to enhance company

performance, which helps the organizational vision become a reality. We see it as a leader’s responsibility to ensure that everything necessary to create that kind of alignment is in place. The term *line-of-sight* has also been used to describe the effects of positive alignment, for it allows everyone in the organization to see, from where they are, how what they do impacts the fulfillment of the vision and mission.

Next comes the letter D, and that stands for *decision making*. If leaders do nothing else all day, they make decisions, as do others throughout the organization. As fundamental as decision making is, there are factors about it that are often ignored or not understood. We address those factors and demonstrate how leaders can become better at making quality decisions. We have often seen how leaders agonize and wrestle with a possible decision for days, weeks, or longer. Then they have a 20-minute meeting with their followers, during which they explain the results of their labors and expect those who heard to be on board instantly. What’s more, those same leaders forfeit the important feedback and insight that their team members, who are often closer to the work than the leaders are, could provide to help fashion and shape the final decision. More on that later.

The second letter E represents *engagement*. Engagement relates to motivation; it is a practice that ensures that people are giving all they have to offer, and not holding back energy, creativity, or cooperation. Leaders are responsible for creating work environments that motivate and engage employees. By showing how this can be accomplished, and by addressing other important issues regarding engagement, we help leaders and their organizations become more productive as well as more enjoyable places to work. Under this topic, we make the statement that no one works for money, which may sound counterintuitive. We believe, however, that the money represents something else, something employees value, whether it be their families’ futures, their security, their self-worth, or their ability to be generous toward important causes. If people worked for money, they would never spend it, but that’s not the case. When leaders know what

really motivates their followers, leaders can use that knowledge to help motivate without manipulations such as threatening to withhold benefits or wages.

We move to R, which stands for *resilience*, something we have noticed getting more and more attention among leadership experts. Resilience is the concept that people who go through difficult and challenging times cannot only endure and continue to function, but they can also come out on the other side in better shape than before. Therefore, it is important that leaders know not only how to become more resilient themselves, but also to create and sustain an organizational environment in which resilience is a quality of their employees. In today's chaotic economic and business environment, resilience is key to continued positive performance.

And finally, the S is for *stewardship*. This concept has gotten a little more press these days than it would have 15 or 20 years ago. It arrived front and center with the popular book *Stewardship* by Peter Block. Stewardship, as we understand it, means more than taking care of financial or fiduciary responsibilities. More importantly, it includes the stewardship of people, of the organization's mission, of the environment, and of the community where the organization resides. The phrase "triple bottom line," coined in 1994 by John Elkington, refers to people, planet, and profit, in that order of importance, and it is often used when describing the obligations of stewardship. When leaders reconceptualize their understanding in terms of what it means to be a good and effective steward, they will consider their organization as being on loan to them. The organization is given to them to steward and to improve so that by the time they leave, it will be better than when they arrived, and they can hand the organization off to the next generation of leaders—who will have even more to work with than the previous leaders received.

## But There's More

To make the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. development model really work, we build it on a foundation of three more necessary components, captured by the acronym S.I.C.:

*Service, Inclusion, and Communication*. Together, S.I.C. represents the perspectives and behaviors that energize potential for becoming a L.E.A.D.E.R.S. leader. We like to think that the S.I.C. are the vitamins, so to speak, which ensure there are no deficiencies in the leader so that the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. model to have its greatest effect.

*Service* indicates that leaders have the perspective that includes a spirit of altruism. Leaders should not be in the business of leading to satisfy their ego or for other selfish reasons, as too often is seen. But leaders' attitude and commitment to service does not in any way imply that leaders become doormats for those they lead. Not at all. Leaders whose mind-set includes service are still responsible for organizational performance and hold others and themselves accountable to achieve their company's vision, mission, and goals. As they implement the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. development model to accomplish these outcomes, however, they do so with the belief that "It's not about me, it's about you," as expressed by acts of practical service to team members and external stakeholders.

*Inclusion* is more than a commitment to diversity, as important as that is, and should be part of a leader's personal vision. Inclusion is a mind-set that causes leaders to be involved with others in the organization. It means seeing all employees as important to organizational success and including them in the processes necessary to create that success. In contrast, exclusive leaders often hole up in a corner and think they have it all—the wisdom, answers, and insights necessary to lead their organization. Leaders who are not inclusive think they do not need to believe in anyone else but themselves. They believe they have all the answers and perspectives necessary for success, as we pointed out under the letter D for decision making in the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. development model.

*Communication* is also foundational to the successful implementation of the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. development model. One size or tool does not fit all where communication is concerned, so work, values, decisions, direction, and vision must be communicated regularly, but in various ways through various media, using a variety of voices. Sometimes it's one-on-one, sometimes

it's in groups via social media, question-and-answer sessions, videos, blog posts, or web sites. We advocate for frequent communication. Communication feeds off relationships and at the same time enhances those relationships, and that cycle serves to make leaders and their followers more effective and productive.

What's more, maintaining alignment and making effective decisions are not possible without communication. There is no such thing as overcommunicating. Ask most people in an organization to identify something that is problematic, and often the response is, "We don't know what's going on around here. No one talks to us." We appeal to leaders to give their followers, those not involved in the decision-making process, as much time as the leaders had (if possible) to come to the same conclusions, or at least to understand the process that was used to make the decision.



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## Conclusion

*A Leadership Carol has a happy ending, or at least a hopeful one. Many organizational scenarios that we describe in the book do not. Often, leaders would rather fail than change their style, believing to the end that they are correct and everyone else is the problem. We present our L.E.A.D.E.R.S. development model in the hopes that our readers will take to heart the lessons behind the model, address their organization's sickness, and replace it with our remedy of S.I.C.-ness—service, inclusion, and communication. If that happens, there will be more happy endings than there are now, for people still respond to authentic and honest leaders who serve to live; they admit they don't have all the answers but believe that together, we have a chance to find them. When that occurs, leadership is functioning at its best, and everyone, including society at large, is the beneficiary.*

*this process of reflection and application that participants experience leadership development that is truly transformational.*

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