

# LEADERSHIP Excellence

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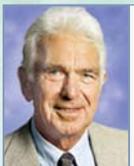
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# Relationship Matters

*Bring out the best in self and others.*



by Diana McLain Smith

RELATIONSHIPS MAKE OR break the success of leaders and their teams. I learned this early in my career when I took a job as the assistant director at a mental health clinic. To my dismay, I soon learned that the director reminded everyone of Captain Queeg, who in *The Caine Mutiny* is portrayed as a complete nut—pacing anxiously across the decks searching for signs of insubordination, rolling ball bearings between his fingers, or shouting bizarre commands from the bridge.

Like Queeg, the director—who I'll call Charlotte—would do things most of us would consider bizarre, getting angry, calling meetings at the last minute to address a minor issue, confronting signs of “insubordination.”

But what struck me was the same thing that struck Barney Greenwald, the lawyer in the *Caine Mutiny* who defended three officers after they wrested command of the *Caine* during a typhoon. Coming upon the officers, champagne glasses in hand as they celebrated their acquittal for mutiny, a drunk Greenwald snarls: “So I torpedoed Queeg for you, and I feel sick about it. You're a fine bunch of officers. Queeg came to you guys for help, and you turned him down. You ragged on him; you made up songs about him. If you had given Queeg the loyalty he needed, do you think it would have been necessary for you to take over?”

That question came to mind as I observed the team at the mental health unit. Charlotte had serious limitations as a leader, but she had also tried to change. Yet the staff ragged on her, undercut her, complained about her behind her back, and even asked me to go to the center's leadership to get her removed. They did everything to prove her worst fears to be true—which only led her to do things that proved the staff's worst fears to be true. Soon, we had our own mutiny on our hands.

## Relationships—For Better or For Worse

Loyalty would not likely have saved the day, but the implication of Greenwald's question is clear: The events aboard the *Caine* were not

authored by Queeg alone. Nor did one or another insubordinate officer create them. No, they were authored by the relationships that Queeg and his officers had formed with one another.

The patterns of interactions that defined these relationships led everyone to confirm each other's worst fears, and those fears led everyone to act in ways that brought out the worst in each other. Over time, instead of creating relationships of mutual trust, support and regard, they created relationships of mutual mistrust, disregard, and sabotage. It was the breakdown of these relationships that authored the events aboard the *Caine* and at the mental health unit.

When we run into difficulty with someone, most of us assume the difficulty lies in the other person, who we come to view as either mad (irrational) or bad (selfish). Note all the books on how to handle difficult or toxic people—all of them pointing their finger at a single individual. But these “cures” only make the illness worse, as we then do things that make a “difficult” person *much* more difficult. We avoid them or play along to sidestep unpleasantness, which says the behavior is okay, or we try to get them to change, breeding resentment.

For example, when Steve Jobs first recruited John Sculley away from Pepsi in the 1980s, Apple was growing fast, and the two looked the perfect match. But when sales dropped, they went from idolizing to demonizing each other. Within months, each was reinforcing the things they resented and mistrusted in the other. In the end, they both felt they had no choice but to go to Apple's board and ask them to take sides: him or me. Acutely aware of the need to act, a reluctant board decided to remove Jobs as the head of Macintosh, sending Jobs into exile and the firm into economic decline for the next 12 years.

Now consider the relationship between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. Though these two leaders faced far worse circumstances and differences, they were able to build a relationship that brought out the best in each of them, allowing them to form

an alliance strong enough to conquer Hitler and win a war. When things got tough—France fell to the Germans or Singapore to the Japanese—they didn't turn on each other or blame each other. Instead, they defended each other to their critics and asked each other how they could help. When the help they provided wasn't enough—as was often the case—they didn't see each other in mad or bad terms, they sought to understand what the other was up against.

## Bring Out the Best

Why the difference? In his account of this relationship, Jon Meachum makes two cogent observations:

- First, Churchill and Roosevelt kept both the mission *and* their relationship in mind. *They understood that their relationship would have a decisive impact on*

*the success or failure of their mission.* As a result, they gave it the same strategic attention they gave every other aspect of the war, and they made sure that they built a relationship strong enough to withstand the pressures they faced. • Second, *they understood that statecraft—not one or the other of them—was*



*inherently imperfect and frustrating.* This helped them put their differences to work. When they disagreed, they did so on the merits; they explored each other's views; they sought to understand each other's concerns; they looked for win-win solutions; and when they came up short, they knew the other had done his best and harbored no ill will.

These two things—keeping the mission *and* the relationship in mind, and understanding that complex tasks are frustrating—allowed them to see and bring out the best in each other.

This way of thinking springs from the perspective leaders take to the difficulties they face. We see distinct perspectives: a *relational perspective* and an *either/or perspective*. The former helps you build relationships that bring out the best in people; the latter creates relationships that bring out the worst. When you bring out the best, you can weather even the most intense conflicts and pressures together. When you bring out the worst, you build a relationship that breaks down quickly under pressure. The choice is *ours*, not one or another person's alone. LE

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**ACTION:** *Keep mission and relationship in mind.*