

Leadership Grammar:

“We” Before “I” Except Before “See”



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One never forgets that old grammar school rhyme: “I” before “E” except after “C.” When it comes to leadership, we might give it a twist: “WE” before “I” except before “SEE.” That’s the rule of “WE” leadership.

Growing up in a small town in Kansas, I can vividly remember playing baseball in an empty lot one hot summer day, when one of my friends pulverized the ball — a towering shot high in the air. The ball kept sailing then disappeared against the Kansas twilight. Suddenly there was a reverberating crash followed by alarm bells. The ball had shattered the windows of Stan’s hardware store. Everybody scattered, not wanting to get caught, except for two of us. It’s not that we were more virtuous than the others; we were just too scared to move! Stan bolted out of the store. When a police officer stopped to see what was going on, we explained what happened. Instead of reporting us for breaking the window, Stan turned to the police officer and said, “These boys need a baseball field.”

Petrified, I asked Stan if he was going to tell my dad about the window. Stan smiled kindly, patted me on the shoulder, and whispered, “Son, that destiny must be your own.” With that, he turned and walked away. True to his word, Stan led the drive to build that baseball field, getting everybody involved, from police and firemen to parents and kids. I didn’t realize it at the time, but Stan demonstrated WE leadership.

Enlightened leaders speak from the “WE”

perspective, not “I.” And, not as in the “royal we.” The “corporate we” reflects the fact that leaders do not speak simply for themselves, rather they speak for the organizations they serve and positions they occupy. At Korn/Ferry, given the nature of our business, we are fortunate to be able to work with the outliers of achievement, helping them build great organizations and teams. Over the years, we have developed sophisticated tools to assess leadership ability. There is a method, however, that everyone can use — The Me-O-Meter: Listen to so-called leaders speak — if “I,” “ME” and “MY” are used (versus “WE,” “US” and “OUR”) more than once in 15 minutes, they are egoists not selfless leaders.

“I” does, however, need to come before “WE” when it precedes “SEE.” Letting others know that the leader truly does see them and deeply values what they do — *I see your efforts. ... I see the difference you make every day...*

Being seen is a powerful motivator. Consider the experiment conducted by researchers at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant in Chicago in 1924 to study the influence of environmental variables on worker productivity. Employees were divided into a test group who received environmental changes to their work area, such as different amounts of lighting, and



a control group who were observed, but did not experience any changes to their environment. Researchers found that the test group did, indeed, have increased productivity with more light — but so did the control group. The reason? The attention paid by the researchers increased the output by both groups.

The opposite — leaders who are anchored in themselves, only concerned with being right, but not doing the right thing. *The Wall Street Journal* recently profiled three economists who collected samples of speeches from press interviews and analyst calls with CEOs of acquiring and target companies involved in M&A deal attempts in the mid-2000s. The economists tallied up the number of times these CEOs used I, ME and MY versus WE, US and OUR. The higher the proportion of singular first-person pronouns used, the more narcissistic the CEO. When narcissistic CEOs were in charge of either a target or an acquiring company, there was less likelihood that a deal would be completed.

The moral of this story is clear: ineffective leadership is not knowing anything about everything; effective leadership is acknowledging what you don't know. Ineffective leadership starts with "I"; effective leadership starts with "WE," except when noticing and recognizing others.

In this issue of *Briefings*, we profile several individuals with exemplary "WE" leadership. Joe Tucci, who has led a six-fold increase in the market capitalization of the storage and information technology firm EMC, continually reminds employees that "this is not my company; this is your company." Tucci, from humble roots in Brooklyn, New York, reminds us how great leaders relentlessly focus through two lenses: outside-in (customers) and inside-out (employees). These are the ultimate arbitrators of performance for a CEO.

Also, we had a conversation with Angel Martinez, chairman and CEO of Deckers Outdoor and overseer of the UGG Australia, Teva, Sanuk and other brands. Like Tucci, Martinez is from humble beginnings (his first job was working in a New York City subway). Martinez is a "WE" learner, who revels in seeing other

people succeed. He comments on topics ranging from branding, marketing and the psychology of selling shoes to leadership, talent and culture.

Think of an iconic, yet hip, retail brand whose stock price has skyrocketed 800 percent over the past three years. Apple? Not yet. It's the storied German fashion house, located 20 miles south of Stuttgart, Germany, Hugo Boss. *Briefings* features the dazzling performance of Hugo Boss and its CEO Claus-Dietrich Lahrs as they continue to make an imprint on global fashion.

In addition to articles on "WE" leaders, this issue of *Briefings* explores happiness, sleeplessness, how to grow in hard times and, the mystique of culture in mergers and acquisitions, and, of course, the satire of P.J. O'Rourke, who while lamenting on the death of leadership in America, asks: "Where are the leaders in the sciences?" Designing Super Mario phone apps. "Where are the leaders in the arts?" Celebrity rehab.

From tying your own shoelaces to providing shoes for others. From your parents caring for you to caring for your parents. From memorization of data to comprehension of facts to application of knowledge. These are the natural cadences in life as we mature. What we never forget, however, are those first moments of accomplishment — like riding a two-wheel bicycle — when we felt freedom, joy and pride in what we were able to master. These are the same feelings a leader must evoke by noticing, recognizing and empowering others. Great leaders know that leadership starts with them, but it's never about them. They understand the responsibility they have for the care and feeding of others. In other words, they know the leadership grammar rule: WE before I, except before SEE.

PS: My dad has long passed away, but last summer I took my son to that baseball field. As we sat on the bench looking at the kids playing baseball, I put my arm around Jack with a satisfying smile. Stan was correct; destiny must be your own.

