

The Four Capacities Every Great Leader Needs (and Very Few Have)

By Tony Schwartz

When I was a very young journalist, full of bravado and barely concealed insecurity, Ed Kosner, editor of *Newsweek*, hired me to do a job I wasn't sure I was capable of doing. Thrown into deep water, I had no choice but to swim. But I also knew he wouldn't let me drown. His confidence buoyed me.

Some years later, I was hired away by Arthur Gelb, the managing editor of *The New York Times*. This time, I was seduced by Gelb's contagious exuberance about being part of a noble fraternity committed to putting out the world's greatest newspaper.

Over the last dozen years, I've worked with scores of CEOs and senior executives to help them build more engaged, high performance cultures by energizing their employees. Along the way, I've landed on four key capacities that show up, to one degree or another, in the most inspiring leaders I've met.

1. Great leaders recognize strengths in us that we don't always yet fully see in ourselves.

This is precisely what Kosner did with me. He provided belief where I didn't yet have it, and I trusted his judgment more than my own. It's the *Pygmalion* effect: expectations become self-fulfilling.

Both positive and negative emotions feed on themselves. In the absence of Kosner's confidence, I simply wouldn't have assumed I was ready to write at that level.

Because he seemed so sure I could--he saw better than I did how my ambition and relentlessness would eventually help me prevail--I wasted little energy in corrosive worry and doubt.

Instead, I simply invested myself in getting better, day by day, step by step. Because we can achieve excellent in almost anything we practice with sufficient focus and intention, I did get better, which fed my own confidence and satisfaction, and my willingness to keep pushing myself.

2. Rather than simply trying to get more out of us, great leaders seek to understand and meet our needs, above all a compelling mission beyond our immediate self-interest, or theirs.

Great leaders understand that how they make people feel, day in and day out, has a profound influence on how they perform.

We each have a range of core needs--physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Great leaders focus on helping their employees meet each of these needs, recognizing that it helps them to perform better and more sustainably.

Arthur Gelb helped me meet not just my emotional need to be valued, but also my spiritual need to be engaged in a mission bigger than my own success. Far too few

leaders take the time to figure out what they truly stand for, beyond the bottom line, and why we should feel excited to work for them.

3. Great leaders take the time to clearly define what success looks like, and then empower and trust us to figure out the best way to achieve it.

One of our core needs is for self-expression. One of the most demoralizing and infantilizing experiences at work is to feel micromanaged.

The job of leaders is not to do the work of those they lead, but to serve as Chief Energy Officer [1] -- to free and fuel us to bring the best of ourselves to work every day.

Part of that responsibility is defining, in the clearest possible way, what's expected of us--our concrete deliverables. This is a time-consuming and challenging process, and most leaders I've met do very little of it. When they do it effectively, the next step for leaders is to get out of the way.

That requires trusting that employees will figure out for themselves the best way to get their work done, and that even though they'll take wrong turns and make mistakes, they learn and grow stronger along the way.

4. The best of all leaders--a tiny fraction--have the capacity to embrace their own opposites, most notably vulnerability alongside strength, and confidence balanced by humility.

This capacity is uniquely powerful because all of us struggle, whether we're aware of it or not, with our self worth. We're each vulnerable to believing, at any given moment, that we're not good enough.

Great leaders don't feel the need to be right, or to be perfect, because they've learned to value themselves in spite of shortcomings they freely acknowledge. In turn, they bring this generous spirit to those they lead.

The more leaders make us feel valued, in spite of our imperfections, the less energy we will spend asserting, defending and restoring our value, and the more energy we have available to create value.

All four capacities are grounded in one overarching insight. Great leaders recognize that the best way to get the highest value is to give the highest value.

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Tony Schwartz is President and CEO of The Energy Project, a company that helps individuals and organizations fuel energy, engagement, focus, and productivity by harnessing the science of high performance. Tony's most recent book, The Way We're Working Isn't Working: The Four Forgotten Needs that Energize Great Performance [3], was published in May 2010 and became an immediate The New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestseller. Follow him on Twitter@TonySchwartz [4].

Links:

[1] <http://blogs.hbr.org/schwartz/2010/06/the-ceo-is-the-chief-energy-of.html>

[2] <http://www.tonyschwartz.com/blog.php>

[3] <http://www.amazon.com/Way-Were-Working-Isnt-Performance/dp/1439127662>

[4] <http://twitter.com/tonyschwartz/>