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The Case for Clarity: A Key Leadership Quality

When senior leaders make short, clear statements about their customers, core strengths, desired future and action plans they prevent employee confusion and anxiety. They generate confidence throughout the organization through clarity, replacing uncertainty with resilience.

Leadership and management guru Marcus Buckingham, quoted in *The One Thing You Need to Know: About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success*, sums it up as follows: “Great leaders rally people to a better future, by discovering what is universal and capitalizing on it.” Preoccupation with the future and the ability to communicate one’s vision with clarity drive leadership, he asserts.

This does not mean great leaders are primed to outperform their competitors, increase productivity or help others achieve success; rather, they are dissatisfied with the status quo, envision a better future and strive to share it with others to achieve success. Great leaders clearly appreciate current challenges and believe they have what it takes to conquer them and forge ahead.

Great Managing Versus Great Leading

Every manager’s starting point is the individual employee. Managers must assess talents, skills, knowledge, experience and goals to design a specific future that fosters each employee’s personal success. No manager can excel without hiring good people, setting clear expectations, recognizing and praising excellence, and demonstrating a sense of caring.

Great leaders play a different role from that of managers: They begin with an image of the future. They then focus their attention on persuading others that success awaits within this vision.

Five Basic Fears and Needs

Every leader quickly learns that most people have some basic fear when confronted with uncertainty—and the future is always uncertain. Leaders must consequently find a way to guide people through uncertainty and change.



Anthropologists and scientists, in fact, have discovered five basic fears that are universal, each of which correlates with a basic need:

Fear	Correlated Need
Death (our own and our family's)	Security
The outsider	Community
The future	Clarity
Chaos	Authority
Insignificance	Respect

Source: Donald E. Brown in *Human Universals* (1991)

The most essential fear leaders must confront is fear of the future. They must find ways to engage employees' fears of the unknown and transform them into a vision for a better future. Clarity is the tool used to accomplish this.

Four Points of Clarity

According to Buckingham, clarity in leadership applies to four key areas:

1. **Whom do we serve?** Who are your customers? How can you define them based on what they want and/or need from you? Compiling information from customers enables you to craft a vivid customer definition to help employees understand their concerns and values.
2. **What is our core strength?** By defining your organization's core strength, you educate your employees about how they will prevail in the future, using their edge to best competitors despite any obstacles.
3. **What is our core metric?** To ensure clarity, let your team know the most important metric for success. Avoid measuring several team behaviors or skills at once. Senior management can track several metrics, but leaders must define only the most important core metrics for teams to achieve focus. Make sure the selected behavior falls under employees' control, as they must have the power to influence their scores.
4. **What actions can we take today?** Symbolic action occurs when a particular goal is achieved to create confidence and success. Systematic actions include new activities that focus on the needs of customers, highlight core strengths, and lead to success on core metrics.



How Do the Best Leaders Achieve Clarity?

All leaders develop certain disciplines to help them achieve greater clarity. Here are a few suggestions from Buckingham:

- 1. Take time to reflect.** Most great leaders take some time out of their busy schedules for reflection. This time dedicated to thinking is incredibly valuable, allowing high-performing leaders to achieve remarkable success, in spite of complexity.
- 2. Select your heroes with great care.** The individuals you recognize and celebrate become role models for others. Look to the people and events that you want others to emulate. When you recognize a high-achieving performer, be explicit in your recognition by explaining how he or she helped bring the desired future one step closer.
- 3. Practice.** Discipline yourself to practice using your words, images and stories in a way that helps employees perceive the future with clarity. The best leaders don't try to come up with newer and better speeches; rather, they practice and refine their favorite speeches, focusing on the material that is real and pertinent.

Leaders must never forget the universal need for security that is created through community, clarity, authority and respect. Clarity is the most likely element to engender confidence, persistence, resilience and creativity.

The ideas and concepts described in this article are attributed to Marcus Buckingham, author of *The One Thing You Need to Know: About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success*. The challenge for leaders to inspire a clear and compelling future for their organization has never been more essential. As a leader, how do you communicate with your team or your organization to bring clarity of vision for your compelling future? For more information on building your leadership skills, contact me at Mary@wernercoaching.com.

About the Author: *Mary C. Werner, CPA, MOD is the founder of Werner Coaching and Consulting, Inc., a practice that builds on her more than 25 years of accounting, business and financial consulting experience. A leader of leaders, Mary is especially skilled at coaching and consulting with CPAs, attorneys and other business professionals who are interested in accelerating their personal and professional growth for breakthrough results. For more information, visit <http://www.wernercoaching.com> or contact Mary directly at Mary@wernercoaching.com.*

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