

## The CEO as facilitator-leader: Making Success Easy

*facilitation*: to make easy or less difficult or more easily achieved.  
[French *faciliter* via Italian *facilitare*, from facile 'easy', from Latin *facilis*]

Success in your enterprise comes from your people. People are the only asset that make a creative difference. Money, plant, machinery, computers—all are inert. The magic spark that turns them into value adding tools comes from the way people use them. As a chief executive, I always operated from the standpoint that people make the difference. And that a successful chief executive's primary task was to make it as easy as possible for as many of my staff as possible to contribute the most they possibly could to making the enterprise as successful as possible.

Here are some of the things I learned:

### 1. *Trust People*

Everything comes down to this. Either you trust people or you don't. In my experience, too many leaders don't. Deep down we have learned to be cynical, disbelieving and non-trusting. Scepticism is the hallmark of 21<sup>st</sup> century society. We examine everything for its hidden agenda. We look for conspiracy with a paranoid fervour.

One of my early bosses told me that a peer of mine "had not *earned* his (the boss's) trust". Yet my experience is that trust is not earned. It is *given*.

Here is the Golden Rule: If you trust someone, they become trustworthy.

And its corollary: If you do not trust someone, they become untrustworthy.

#### 1.1. **Everything I Need To Know I Learned In Grade School**

I had the good fortune to learn trust from Mr Thorpe, my Grade 3 teacher. He was the first teacher I had who liked his students enough to trust us to behave well, to enjoy learning, and to work hard. We rewarded him with attention, discipline and intellectual growth. In contrast, my Grade 5 teacher presided with alert eye and flashing cane (this was the Fifties after all) over an unruly, noisy, wicked rabble. The same boys. Different teacher.

In our modern risk-averse world, it seems risky to adopt a let's-trust-em approach. But like many things that seem risky, it works out better in the end.

If I really tried to remember all the people who worked for me over the years, I guess only a handful failed to respond positively to my trust in them. And I suppose I could count on the fingers of one hand the ones who actually betrayed that trust. Of course, many were a bit surprised at first to find out that I really did trust them. It was so totally outside of their experience.

I found that almost everyone responds to being trusted. They work hard to show that they deserve your confidence. For most people, it is the most affirming and energizing thing a boss can do for them. And it costs nothing to do. You don't have to pay for a computer program, nor a training course, nor an internal audit system, nor a new department. You just need to believe in your people, and trust them to do the job.

It's a pity that so many find it so hard to do.

## 1.2. “State of Grace” Management

One direct report seemed confused by my management style. She had come from the Public Service where things, apparently, are different. In one team meeting she expressed her frustration.

“Working for you is like being in a State of Grace,” she exploded, intending sarcasm. The rest of the team laughed and complimented her insight.

## 1.3. “You’re all chief executives!”

When I took over leadership of the Middle East & Eastern Europe Region for World Vision International, I inherited a program of around USD30 million with 500 staff spread across nine countries. After a couple of months orientation, I invited each of the country directors to a regional conference. On Day One I announced that I considered them chief executives of their own in-country organisations. I said that I would expect them to take full responsibility for World Vision’s work in their country, and that I would manage them as if they were business unit leaders (which they were).

This was a little different to their experience to that time and one or two needed to adjust. One country manager immediately took me aside and said this was “too much” for him. We found a mutually satisfying role for him as a site manager that continued his World Vision career at a level of less complexity. Another country manager agreed, but then continued to telephone me at least once a week for “permissions”. The rest breathed a metaphorical “thank you” and ran with the ball I had given them (to mix metaphors).

## 2. Give Your People Space

One outworking of trusting your people is that you will give your people space. Not merely physical space, although this might be beneficial, but intellectual space. And, especially, decision-making space.

Give your people a clear idea of what you want them to do, then leave them alone. Let them know that you are available to bounce ideas off if they want (most people won’t), but don’t bombard them with your ideas even if it’s your area of expertise.

## 3. Give Your Ideas Away

Another kind of space is ownership space. People need to own their jobs. Few things are more energizing than the idea that you had the idea, and that you are personally responsible for making your ideas work. As the boss, be very careful about how you introduce your ideas.

Develop the art of the pregnant question. “Have you ever thought about doing that on the Internet?” *You* might have been thinking about this for months. *You* might be frustrated and internally fuming that this particular person hasn’t already developed a plan. The idea of the pregnant question is to get *them* thinking about it.

Often the pregnant question asked only once does the trick. Sometimes you will have to embark on a subtle campaign. “Hey Jack, did you see the web page developed by Widget Corporations? I’ll bet you could have done better.” Or maybe you find that one of Jack’s subordinates is working away on the Internet idea. Find a way to encourage them.

However you do this, the end result should be that they own the idea. Not your idea. Their idea. If you haven't got enough ego strength to remain silent when the thing you have been suggesting for 9 months miraculously appears as someone else's idea in someone else's proposal, then don't become a leader.

### **3.1. Leave Ideas Lying Around**

A young, and very bright, colleague said, "Philip leaves ideas lying around, hoping someone will pick them up. He never picks them up himself. In the end, you say to yourself 'Guess I better do this' and you pick up the idea and own it yourself."

## **4. Manage Outcomes Not Details**

This is an outcome of trusting people enough to give them space. Tell people what you want them to achieve, then don't interfere unless they ask.

Of course, it is easier to say than to do. Most of us got to be executives by being good at a few technical things. Often we've made many mistakes in the past and we think our job is to stop people making the same mistakes again. This is wrong. It might even be said that our job is to let our people make all the same mistakes all over again. Few things are learned from successes, but everyone can see where the problem is in a failure.

Let your people learn. Define the desired outcome as clearly as possible. Even let them know about possible resources they might use. One of those resources might be your experience and knowledge. If they choose to use it, well and good. If they don't, they will learn something to their advantage in due course.

## **5. Develop People's Strengths: Accommodate Their Weaknesses**

People development is not about fixing weaknesses. It is about improving strengths.

Too much time and money is wasted in organisations trying to help people do what they are not good at. This is simply inefficient.

A better tactic is to work out what people are good at and give them as many opportunities to develop that gift. If you play tennis passably well, then play some more. If you play the piano passably well, then play more. If you're good at writing, write more. If you are good at figures, add more up. If you are good with people, socialise.

The normal theory is that you write a job description, hire someone who nearly matches it, and then train them to develop their weaknesses so they can fulfil the requirements of the job description. This does not work.

First, because you never get a candidate that completely fills the job description. There is always something lacking.

Second, because the solution to the mismatch is usually to try to plug the gaps with more and more training. This only leads to a bored and frustrated employee.

### **5.1. Practise Your Best Shots**

Instead, we should take a lesson from the sports world. Few sports champions have every skill required to be a champion. Few tennis players have all the shots. Their

solution is to play to their strengths. The big server in tennis hones his service until it is a ballistic missile. The player with the quick reflexes and good eye concentrates on returning service faster and sooner.

So should it be with developing our people. Play to their strengths. If something is lacking from the job description, rethink the way you have divided up the work.

### **5.2. Re-write the Job Description**

We hired a micro-finance expert to work on, inter alia, the small business loans program in Romania, and to develop micro-finance work across the region. He worked hard and diligently, but was completely focussed on what he could see in Romania. The regional work was not getting attended to. After discussion, we agreed to keep him focussed on the one country, and created a new position at the regional level.

### **5.3. Redesign the Job**

At World Vision Australia in 1986, the issuing of receipts to donors was a function within the accounting department. We wanted to integrate it more into an improving customer service approach. The executive responsible for finance at first seemed to know what was required, but results were slow in coming. We talked it through and made our accounting department more specialised, and transferred the receipting function to the Customer Service executive. In time, this paid off in unexpected ways. Freed from the responsibility of managing in an area of weakness, the finance executive developed a sophisticated, and profitable, treasury function for the management of foreign currency conversions and short term investments.

## **6. Walk The Talk**

Unfortunately, most people can see through their bosses like glass. We all have weaknesses. Better to admit them up front and early. Where you can, staff yourself with people who are strong where you are weak. I **always** hire good finance people because that's an area I know only enough about to tell if I am getting bad advice.

If you try to hide your weaknesses, you won't last long as a leader. Your followers will lose confidence in you because they will see that you are trying to cover up.

Likewise, insincerity is anathema to facilitator-leaders. If you don't believe it, don't do it. You can try to fake it, but you'll be found out.

This does not mean that a person who is naturally shy and introverted should not try to be leader. It means you should be authentic. People respond to the genuine article and many will walk over coals for the leader who is prepared to reveal his or her wounds.

### **6.1. Admit to your weaknesses**

Most of my close colleagues know it is an effort for me to socialise in small groups. I like people, but I prefer crowds. I love to give speeches to big audiences. I dislike small talk at cocktail parties or after meetings. I like being on stage, I dislike intimacy.

Like many actors, I enjoy the bizarre anonymity of the public persona. I feel I can hide behind performance. Intimacy is more frightening. Before working at World

Vision, I was a radio announcer. In many ways it was an ideal job for me as a young man. I was alone and invisible in a studio, yet thousands of people were listening.

People who work with me soon see this side of my character (call it a “weakness” if you like). Indeed, I usually tell them pretty soon. Obviously some colleagues wish I were different. They would like to work with someone who can enter into their joys and sorrows at a personal level. But what they see is what they get.

## **6.2. Hire Staff Not Like You**

And a related thing: Here too, compensate for your weaknesses in the people you hire around you. In Vienna I hired a regional operations director (my second-in-command) who was almost the complete opposite of me in every respect. It was, for both of us, one of the most productive business relationships we ever had.

## **7. Manage Symbols**

“OK,” I hear you say, “I’m trusting my people. I’m hiring well. I am being real. But how do I actually manage?”

The answer lies mostly in managing symbols. *How* you do things usually speaks louder than *what* you do.

Every action has a symbolic value. The boss who wears jeans to work is expressing a more casual and free approach to work than the boss who wears a three-piece suit. The boss who sits behind a large desk in the centre of a large room is expressing values of power and authority that are different from the boss who chooses a work station like everyone else.

### **7.1. Doors**

Doors are among the most powerful symbols. If the boss’s door is closed it is quite normal for the staff to assume that the boss is talking about them, or discussing secrets. It expresses exclusion. And more loudly than most people realise.

I almost never closed the door to my room. Usually I only closed it when a staff member was crying. And, of course, everyone in the office knew it anyway.

### **7.2. Agendas**

Agendas are very powerful symbols. When I was managing World Vision’s Middle East & Eastern Europe region, one of my favourite symbols was the regional conference program. It costs a lot to bring the people together for a whole week. Ten country managers from all around the region. Plus seven or eight regional office staff. Plus another twenty or thirty from fundraising offices all over the world. Plus a dozen technical specialists.

So much investment traditionally resulted in dawn to beyond-dusk meetings. Tightly controlled by the regional leadership. And packed solid. A week of non-stop meetings.

I threw that kind of agenda out.

Each time I first considered what would be the major strategic input. I scheduled a strip of inputs on this topic across the week. Say the session before lunch each day.

Usually there were five or six other key issues that needed to be dealt with by everybody present. These went into the earlier morning sessions.

The rest of the time was called Own Time. The time is your own, to do with what you want!

I explained this in the lead up to, and regularly during each conference. Delegates were responsible to organise all the time between lunch and dinner as they liked. They could rest, play sport, hold meetings, go sight-seeing, do emails. As they liked.

Most people used their Own Time to schedule private meetings with other delegates. Common interest groups scheduled meetings, occasionally involving the whole conference. But also joggers self-organised runs and people went sight-seeing. And a few jet-lagged people had a snooze.

I also implemented a “rule” that there should be no business after the evening meal. We opened the bar. A few played cards or Scrabble (even inaugurating the Official Scrabble Tie Award that progressed from year to year). Usually someone would organise a self-funded evening to the theatre or a concert. And, of course, some talked business in a relaxed, non-threatening environment. The best deals were inevitably done after dinner.

Invariably such conferences were not only the most productive for the enterprise, they were also the most fun and the most memorable. It begins with a belief that people can be trusted to organise their own agendas.

### **7.3. Love spouses**

Working as foreigners abroad has special challenges for families. Once a year I organised, at company expense, a weekend retreat for all the leaders and their families. We would pick a nice place to go such as Malta or Cyprus (in the off-season it’s warmer and cheaper than the rest of Europe). The program was largely unstructured (you can trust people to organise themselves) and focussed on relationships. One morning I would schedule discussion in small groups encouraging people to talk about the struggles of living in foreign places.

For many, the relationships built during these few days sustained them for the next year of work.

One spouse said during one of our meetings, “My husband has worked for this organisation for 19 years, and this is the first time anything like this has been done for *me*.”

## **8. Small Gifts Have Big Leverage**

Simple acts of authentic kindness are most powerful in building trust and loyalty. Much more effective than money.

### **8.1. Postcards**

When I started to travel I would send postcards to my nieces and nephews. We had around thirty staff serving overseas, so I began to include them in the mailing. The time spent waiting for planes in foreign airports was thus put to good use. I was astounded at how much this simple act was appreciated.

## **9. Choose Well: Move Well**

Perhaps it is a little late in the paper to mention it, but as well as trusting people, you also need to give people jobs that match their capability. No point in trusting someone to play a Beethoven Piano Sonata if they can't play the piano. Giving people jobs beyond their capability and then leaving them unattended is just setting them up for failure.

The first decision point is in staff selection. Look for capable people who can do the job. There is plenty of advice around about how to do good staff selection.

But you will still get it wrong now and again. What to do?

Move them on. I don't mean fire them, although that may need to be a last resort. I have usually found it is possible to move people by showing them the way to a position that is a better fit. If a person is a square peg in a round hole, a square hole looks pretty inviting.