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A Question All Leaders Should Answer: "Why Should Anybody Follow You?"

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It's an issue that many managers rarely confront, in part because they don't have to — their position of authority means they can make people do things. But you're never going to get the best work out of people that way. [Frank Pedersen](#), a veteran business executive and one of my colleagues at [Merryck & Co.](#), a senior leadership development and mentoring firm, shared with me how he uses this powerful but simple question for important discussions about what it means to be a true leader.

Q. What are the most common themes that come up when you're advising senior executives?

A. I often ask people, "Why should anybody follow you?" And it's rare that they have had the insight to ask that question of themselves. It's an idea that really lands with the executives I've been working with. They want to spend a lot of time figuring out why somebody should follow them, apart from the fact they are the boss and can tell people what to do.

Q. How do people react, and how do you guide them through that discussion?

A. The reactions range from stunned silence to "I wish you hadn't asked me that question" to "I have no idea." It also clarifies for them why they didn't like a particular boss, or why another was a great role model. So I try to help them understand why they followed certain people — what was that leader's behavior? — and why would somebody follow them.

One person I worked with was a keen fan of rugby, and he had played himself. We talked about the time that England won the World Cup for the first time, and what the captain had done in the final moments. He had remembered the game vividly, and that the captain gave the ball away to somebody else who then scored the goal.

I said, "Well, would you follow him?" After a long silence, he said, "I get it now. I understand why people would follow him, and now I see how I can get people to follow me. I need to stop clinging onto something and start to let go."

He had remembered every single move that happened on the field, and so he was able to reframe that and make an emotional connection in the context of becoming a leader who people want to follow.

Q. It's such a simple question: "Why would people follow me?" It's puzzling why people don't think about it more often.

A. When you are relatively young, as a lot of people are when they get promoted into management positions, the people who promote you say, "You achieve great results, therefore I want you to do this." It's all about results, results, results. Never once did anybody tell me, "You achieve results by getting people to follow you and work for you."

"If you have to press somebody into service to do something, their heart is not going to be in it."

Our entire culture is results-driven, performance-driven, and so we tend quite often to forget that question of "Why should anybody follow me?"

This conversation brings back memories of my very early days when I was working on a construction site, and the site manager mentioned a saying: "One volunteer is worth ten pressed men." If you have to press somebody into service to do something, their heart is not going to be in it.

Q. How would you answer that question yourself, given that you were in leadership positions throughout your career? Why would somebody follow you?

A. I have thought about this in hindsight, and my take on it is that they could always trust me. If I said that something would happen, they could have absolute blind faith that it would happen because I had never, ever let them down.

I also had a lot of humility — some people call it the reverse imposter syndrome, because it's opposite of acting like you know everything. When I took on a new role, I asked a lot of questions with the intention to learn and understand. I think there was a genuine interest that came across to people.

Q. Shifting gears, are there patterns that you've seen in corporate cultures – the problems that can create metaphorical bad cholesterol for an organization?

A. Generalizations are dangerous, but one common problem is ambiguity. Bad cholesterol is created when there's ambiguity about why we're doing things. That leads to confusion, and so people stop making decisions. Lack of trust is another problem, but I'm not sure which comes first, ambiguity or lack of trust, but they are related.

Q. Other leadership lessons you've learned over the course of your career?

A. Many, many years ago, I got some feedback after an assessment from an elderly man in HR. He took me aside and said, "Frank, you don't need to fight every enemy you see. Pick your battles." I said to him, "What do you mean?" He said, "Just think about the words and you'll make your own meaning out of it." That was one massive lesson.

The other was in a similar assessment round a couple of years later, and somebody said to me, "If you would delegate more, you would be a much better leader. There's no doubt that you can do a lot of things yourself. It won't be long before you'll be leading huge organizations. You cannot do everything yourself so you might as well start to learn to delegate."

I asked him how to do that. He said, "Take a piece of paper and write a big D on it and slam it on your wall where you see it all time." I did that, so I had this big D on my wall in my office.

Those are the things that shaped me and really helped me early on. I ended up being better at delegating and picking my battles.

Q. That's a great story about the D in your office. Did people ever say, "Frank, what's that D stand for?"

A. They did, and I told them.

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