Great Leaders Are Lifelong Learners

Mark Miller, a business leader, bestselling author, and communicator, began writing about a decade ago. He teamed up with Ken Blanchard, co-author of The One Minute Manager, to write The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do. Today, almost 400,000 copies of The Secret are in print, and it has been translated into more than 20 languages.

Recently, he released The Secret of Teams, which outlines some of the key lessons learned from a 20-year study on what makes some teams outperform the rest. His newest book, Great Leaders Grow: Becoming a Leader for Life, was released in February 2012 and was co-authored with Ken Blanchard.

Q: Your new book is called The Secret of Teams. What separates the teams that really deliver from the ones that simply spin their wheels?

A: I began my career at Chick-fil-A 35 years ago in one of the local restaurants, and have been on the corporate staff since 1979. In the late 1980s, we decided we wanted to learn all we could about teams. We felt a team-based structure would be the way for the future, and for 20 years, we’ve been tinkering and experimenting with different team-based initiatives.

We found that three things separate teams. The first is that many teams are teams in name only. They aren’t really working together toward common objectives. At Chick-fil-A, we are constantly trying to address this. Second, even if a group desires to become a team, many don’t have the skills and knowledge to create a team. Third, some teams spin their wheels because of poor leadership. In fact, I don’t know of many teams that have become great without a great leader.

Q: What is the secret of high-performance teams?

A: The leader has a unique role. I’m not big on self-directed teams. They may be well managed, but a team needs a good leader. A good leader in a high-performance team structure has a unique set of responsibilities, such as establishing a vision, establishing core values, providing resources, establishing boundaries for the team, delegating real responsibility to the team, investing in the development of the team members, and encouraging the team.

Compare and contrast that with what the team does; the team also has responsibilities. It needs to communicate the vision; communicate and enforce the company’s core values; solve problems, manage day-to-day performance, put out the fires and prevent the next ones; and provide accountability. The leader is the final arbiter on any issue, but the team is responsible for accountability. At the end of the day, we think the secret of high-performing teams is a group of people who are focused on results and understand the critical skills and talent of their community.

Most would agree that you have to have talent and skills to be a high-performance team. You can build a good team with talent and skills, but we’ve found that the idea of community is the turbocharger. It’s pretty rare and not many people have talked about it. In my book, The Secret of Teams, I mentioned it as an observation. At that time I thought it was a random chance, but if you leave something to chance, it is a matter of chance. If a leader wants to build a community, it must be part of his strategy.

Q: One reviewer notes that in your book “you give concrete suggestions for building teams where people know each other deeply, serve each other willingly, and genuinely care for each other.” Give us a thumbnail sketch of how leaders can encourage this among their employees.

A: Leaders have to embrace the idea that community matters and have to commit to pursuing genuine community. For that, the leader must be transparent and create a community where its members care genuinely about each other. This applies to every team leader, not just senior leaders. You can’t do it by edict.

Community happens in the individual teams, five to seven people at a time. Although the idea of community in the workplace sounds obvious, it isn’t that evident because most leaders have never personally experienced community. Therefore, most leaders don’t understand the power of community. Once a leader has experienced community, he can’t do without it. We live under a paradigm that separates work life from home life, and that’s polar to what we’re talking about.

Frederick Taylor, the father of scientific management, once said, “Leaders think, supervisors talk, and workers work.” His statement is opposite to the community spirit. When you create a strong sense of community at work, people care about the work because they care about each other. It’s a turbocharged, upward spiral. If you share your life’s story with another member of your team (in sports,
Q: You have said that the best leaders connect with their people, and a large component of this connection is rooted in knowing them as individuals. How can leaders facilitate this process?

A: The answer to that question goes back to the commitment that community is part of our conscious plan and strategy for building a high-performance team and company. A leader has to commit time and energy. It starts with a leader’s decision that this is part of the design; it is not left to random chance. He needs to get personal updates from employees, have meals together as a team, and have holiday parties where people can relax together outside of a work environment.

If I know you have a sick child, then I can understand why you may need to take time off. It’s a combination of many things, but we’ve found that what happens over time is, as a leader, you need to go deeper into the community; it’s cumulative. The group needs to do it as a unit, and it’s extremely challenging.

Q: Many leaders are stretched in so many different directions, so how does The Secret of Teams help leaders guide their teams to reach their full potential?

A: The silver lining for all the hard work of guiding your team to reach its full potential resides in three things. First, when you create a high-performance team, the leader gets more capacity in the form of energy and time. He can rely on others on his team, and the leader no longer has to make all the decisions and solve all the problems. Second, performance improves. Having four or five people thinking about something is better and smarter than one person trying to figure everything out. Finally, the real advantage to creating a high-performance team is it serves as an accelerator for new and emerging leadership growth and development.

Q: You note in your blog that “an iceberg is the perfect metaphor for leadership.” Please elaborate.

A: A decade ago Chick-fil-A realized it needed more leaders faster because the growth of our company was on the horizon. So we started developing ideas on a common definition of leadership. This project took many months to reach consensus. Often we found ourselves discussing leadership skills and character. We came to the conclusion that skills are, like the iceberg metaphor, 10 percent above the water line. They are easy to see.

But about 90 percent of leadership is the character of the leader, and I think of it as the 90 percent of the iceberg below the water line. Character is harder to discern, but critically important; if you don’t have character, your skills aren’t important. Who a person is at their core is where you start when you are talking about leadership. After a person’s character is established, you can talk about skills.

Peter Drucker once said, “The quality of character doesn’t make the leader, but the absence of character flaws the whole process.” Character is 90 percent of leadership; it’s the lion’s share of the battle. I’m currently working on another book project examining the marks of character. Integrity isn’t only for leaders; you want it for everyone on your team and in your company.

Q: What are some strategies for leaders (either of their company or division) to continue to learn about leadership and improve the way they lead?

A: The best leaders have to be committed to lifelong learning. That learning may take a lot of different forms depending on an individual’s learning style. How an individual learns also will be based on his stage of life, career, availability of mentors, reading preferences, conferences attended, and simply by that person trying different things.

Individual leaders have to figure out their own path for learning. One of the people I know built his own blog. He was an experiential learner. I, on the other hand, have sought out those who already possess the skills to build my blog. Both are hallmarks of lifelong learners; it’s just a different approach.

Q: How can leaders be aware of the necessity to reinvent themselves, and what can they do to help that process?

A: Reinvention is part of our leadership model; it’s the heart of what our leaders do. They engage and develop each other by reinventing continuously. The best leaders understand that progress is always preceded by change.

We’ve found that the best leaders are always willing to reinvent structure, that’s the way they’re organized to get the work done. Structure should enable not inhibit the work. It ties back to lifelong learning.

At Chick-fil-A we encourage our leaders to reinvent the system. If you want to improve sales, you’ll have to change something, and our question is “What are you going to do specifically?” Hope is not a strategy.

Mark Miller was interviewed by Ruth Weiss; ruthweiss711@gmail.com.