

Google lists some 29,000,000 references on leadership. This would suggest that the topic is impossibly complex. But when you work at the heart of the human leader, the concept of leadership becomes much more profound—and simpler. Photography—with its myriad lessons on focus, perspective, framing, and seeing—helps us quickly get to that deeper center.

The Leader As Visual ArtistSM

THE POWER OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

by Katie Cooney and Bernie Saunders

DEFINING LEADERSHIP. Some say we know a leader by his or her ability to lead change, achieve goals, or navigate globalization. Others describe the leader's strategic ability, analytical thinking skills, or adept use of system and process.

But, while these things are necessary to business and organizational success, leadership is not only about possessing a certain collection of skills or reaching goals. Leadership occurs *when a human being connects with and through others to achieve what the leader alone could not*. Leaders work through relationship, and leadership development thus must embrace wider concepts such as emotional resonance, authenticity, courage, foresight, purpose and humility.

We can create models of leadership and seek the individuals who perfectly fit the model—but this perfect paragon has probably never existed. Instead, because a human being is organic, changeable and complex, the people we call leaders pulse between data and emotion, certainty and doubt, energy and retreat. Leaders need to navigate this imperfect landscape

“We see things not as they are, but as we are.”

ANAÏS NIN

from a centered place within them. They connect best with others when they are self-aware, grounded in their intention, confident in their abilities and open to others' ideas, input and perspectives.



What is happening here?

**THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF AWARE-
NESS.** We know that humans interpret current reality largely based on their prior experience and what they believe to be true. In his book *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*,¹ James Flaherty writes that when an individual encounters an event, he will describe it in familiar language and react to it based on his prior experiences (or lack thereof). In leadership development one of the first tasks is to understand the particular filters of

“Photographs can be said to be external windows or maps of our interior self.”

BERNIE SAUNDERS

language, belief, and experience through which the leader interprets life. This is the ground from which development starts. With

its emphasis on seeing, responding to, and interpreting experience, photography offers ample opportunities to listen to our language, identify what we see, and notice our perspective.

A photo shows much about the subject. And it teaches just as much about the photographer and the viewer: As he chooses a photo, is the leader drawn to quietude or activity? As she responds to an image, is she intrigued by the new and exotic, or by something more comfortable and familiar? As he reviews photos, is he satisfied with the captured image or does he want to edit the work?

And if the leader were to intentionally photograph images that describe some quality in herself, what would those images reveal?

¹Flaherty, J. (2005) *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*. 2nd edition. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.

EXPANDING AWARENESS TO INCLUDE OTHERS.

By studying images and ascribing language to what we see, we learn something about ourselves. By sharing our insights and listening to others, we learn something about them. We begin to see that another's perspective is valid, and we learn to listen to others without imposing value judgments, "yes, buts" or other barriers to understanding. We create the opportunity to talk about our beliefs and respond to circumstance in a fresh way. There is evidence from neuroscience that photography is an especially apt tool to deepen our self-awareness and connect more authentically and openly with others. In his book, *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School*,² John Medina asserts that visual cues significantly increase our ability to acquire new information over the use of text alone.

But while the visual sense is a powerful instrument for learning, neuroscience also tells us that there is a place on the retina near the optic

nerve that contains no rods or cones—the cells that are receptive to light. This means our visual capacity contains actual blind spots.

But we are unaware of what we are not seeing, because our brain fills in the blank for us based on current context or what we believe should be there. We quite literally do not know that we do not know.

The significance of this for leaders can't be overstated: *Knowing that one may be missing critical information forestalls judgment and opens up the possibility for new interpretations and expanded meaning to emerge.* Knowing that one's perspective is limited and opening one's self to others' perspectives creates the conditions for listening, sharing, and building trust.

“That is the task of good photos, to show us there are plenty of things about which we know far less than we believed.”

HERLINDE KOELBL

When was this photo taken? How do you know?



²Medina, J. (2014) *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School*. 2nd ed. Seattle, WA: Pear Press.



What does this photo tell you about the photographer?

THE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

Of course, other forms of visual art, particularly painting or drawing, can help us touch the wider, intuitive truths of life. But for the modern leader, photography and the photo-

“There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer.”

ANSEL ADAMS

graphic experience (especially digital photography) touch on something that painting and drawing do not: the use of technical equipment and software to try to control outcomes. To observe one's self taking photos is in part the opportunity to see one's relationship to control. With a camera in hand, we may believe that we can go out to “get” or “take” or even “make” the photo we want. But artists understand that the technically perfect image can become inert and uninteresting.

It is the photo shot by happenstance, when the light is shifting, or when the wind comes up, or the subject moves just as the shutter button is pressed, that contains something live and worth revisiting. So in leadership: it is the leader's willingness to trust circumstances and give up control that allows

the more powerful relationship, the new idea, or the unexpected triumph to emerge.

By encountering photographic images, we can learn to pay more astute attention to detail, ask more questions, deepen our appreciation of ideas we have overlooked, and begin to see what has been heretofore hidden to us. Photographer Dewitt Jones wrote about this in a 2015 blog:

...I make sure that, before I even take my cameras out, I have truly opened my eyes...not just to those things I think might make a fine photograph, but to everything around me. To ask...not “what will I take today?” but “what will I be given?” To allow myself to fill with gratitude at everything I see through my lens. That's the connection I seek and when I can achieve it, I honestly wouldn't care if I found I'd forgotten to load my camera with film.³

So in business: goals seem to be everything, but they are ephemeral. Before one year's results are in, new demands are set. It is by fully participating in the photographic process—by confronting images, and seeing the world in new ways—that the photographer deepens his craft. And it is by seeing more deeply, listening more intently, and expanding awareness that the leader also grows.

³ <http://celebratewhatsright.com/article/2015/02/22/goal-and-purpose>

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