

IF YOU WANT TO BE A GREAT LEADER, BE A GREAT HUMAN BEING

Getting 21,000 people to embark on a personal leadership journey designed to drive achievement and inspire creativity sounds like a big ask. But if you open yourself up to the possibility that business success is inextricably linked to personal growth, then the results will take care of themselves.

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Being a great leader and a true inspiration to others isn't an exact science. There's no handbook. There are no foolproof rules of the game. If there was, history wouldn't be littered with so many failures, those who attempted to wisely guide people and organizations, but who ultimately proved to be sadly inadequate. Their intentions may have been good, but their methods were somehow flawed. To really succeed, you need to possess far more than a strong personality and an unswerving belief in your own style, philosophy and overall purpose. That barely scratches the surface. Because real leadership runs deeper. Much deeper.

In order to find out just how deep, we didn't have to look very far. If you want to engage in an absorbing and enlightening discussion about the true meaning of leadership, one of the best people to talk to is AkzoNobel's Tex Gunning. A member of the Executive Committee, he joined the company three years ago to head the global Decorative Paints business. He'd previously been with Unilever for 20 years, where he was famously responsible for one of the most dramatic business turnarounds on record. He created a unique culture where trust, honesty and authenticity liberated a creativity that made a troubled part of Unilever's business soar. Now his visionary style is firmly focused on transforming the world's biggest decorative paints organization. Spend a few minutes with him and you'll quickly realize that people can't learn leadership from a book, or by simply attending a few courses. He'll soon get you thinking about compassion, wisdom, creating meaning, having the courage to stand up for what you believe in and understanding who you are. Because, as Gunning is only too keen to point out, a great leader is first and foremost a great human being. Someone who can grasp a concept which many simply can't get their head around – the fact that leadership is not a position, it's a responsibility.

"This is a massive realization that most people can't make," he explains. "They normally see leadership as a position of honor, power, achievement or recognition of having done good work in the past. The big challenge for people who assume leadership positions is to realize that everything changes the day you are appointed as a leader of others." Why? Because it's not about you anymore. "It's about the people and the organization that you lead," continues Gunning. "Suddenly, all the decisions you take have to be turned around 180 degrees in order to consider what is in the best interests of the people and the organization you are responsible for. Most people can't make that transition."

It was during his two decades with Unilever that Gunning developed and fine-tuned the hugely successful leadership mantra which he is now spreading throughout AkzoNobel's Decorative Paints business. It's based on the fundamental belief that before you can be a great leader, you have to be a great human being. "I have asked thousands of people around the world to describe the leader they would ideally like to work for. It's a difficult question which usually takes them five minutes to answer. The descriptions they eventually come up with always say the same thing. They want a leader who gives them space, who cares, who is trustworthy, respectful, compassionate and visionary. What are they describing? Human qualities. They want a boss who gives them a sense of belonging, a sense that they are being cared for. Someone who makes them feel safe and who recognizes them as a person. So if people describe great leaders and organizations purely in terms of human needs and qualities, then it's easy to conclude that great leaders are first and foremost great human beings."

Gunning – a deeply spiritual person who once embarked on a vision quest in the mountains of Montana (pictured left) – has spent much of the last three years developing these great leaders at AkzoNobel. But when he arrived in 2008, his task was

doubly complicated by the fact that in order to create a real sense of community and meaning within Decorative Paints, he not only had to energize the employees. He also had to integrate the newly acquired ICI business into the organization, and it came with its own culture, history and mindset. "We knew the ideal culture we wanted to create, the challenge was to determine how we would move from our current reality to the reality we wanted. In order to do that, we had to share where we had all come from. What had formed us, transformed us and informed us. What had happened to make our culture and organization what they were today. The second exercise involved deciding how to move forward. Which meant we had to redefine the relationships, because the relationships that define great leadership and a great culture are not defined by strict hierarchy. That's not the organization people describe. They don't want an army-style command and control structure. In a modern, global company that doesn't work anymore. The new organization needs to be more of a matrix, which only functions as well as the quality of the relationships that exists between human beings."

All of which brings us to the concept of lifelines. This is an exercise which more than 10,000 Decorative Paints employees have already experienced. The remaining 11,000 will have done the same by the end of the year. It's all about connecting with yourself and is the first step towards becoming the great human being Gunning refers to. "Everything starts with self, so in order to define the relationships that exist in an organization, you have to ensure that people have a relationship with themselves. The lifeline exercise helps to reveal who you are, what is constructive and destructive in you." Essentially, it requires every individual to become introspective and ask questions such as who am I? Do I understand myself? How do I function? Am I aligned with the objectives of the company? These lifelines are then shared with your team members, which means the relationships are re-defined and become more meaningful. More human. Because, as Gunning pointed out, that's what people want. "With the collective you do exactly the same," he goes on. "Where is AkzoNobel coming from? Where is ICI coming from? What do we want? How do we reach our vision? If we want to achieve and become more successful, there has to be trust and respect. Which is why we are holding each other accountable in terms of where we are moving from and where we want to be. We are creating a sense of community, meaning and spirit. Where people are compassionate, support each other and demonstrate wisdom in their leadership."

This somewhat unconventional approach unsurprisingly raises a few eyebrows in some quarters. Skeptics perhaps find it hard to understand the real value of spending four days in an inspirational setting (usually one which is close to nature) where people sit for many hours in personal reflection before sharing their private thoughts and life experiences with others. Gunning, however, is convinced of its true worth, and he can point to his stunning success at Unilever as irrefutable proof that the self-management exercise works. Because ultimately, it's all about developing a collective intelligence which is aligned and motivated to succeed. "You can't grow a business. A business is a

construct. If your people grow, everything else grows too. So if we want to grow our business, it's entirely dependent on our ability to grow our people. We help bring more wisdom to their decision-making and make them more empathetic to consumers and customers. We have to build the collective intelligence because none of us is as smart as all of us. We put an incredible emphasis on people development as a precursor for business development and on developing an inclusive, interdependent culture as a precursor for the collective intelligence to work in our favor. We're creating great leaders with more vision who have a mission in life and who get excellent results."

Aside from creating the world's leading and most meaningful paint company by unlocking potential and establishing Dulux as an iconic worldwide brand, there's another aspect to this very deliberate approach. One which can be traced back to Gunning's time in his previous job, when he placed the nutritional needs of children in the developing world at the heart of Unilever's business mission. But why do this? Why get involved in humanitarian or social issues? Because great leaders – and great companies – don't just take care of their traditional stakeholders. They also want to change the world and leave it in a better condition than when they found it. The question was, how was he going to do it with a business which essentially sold paint? "We asked ourselves what we could do that would really help communities to become inspired and help to create a better world. That's how we came up with the mission of adding color to people's lives. We want to educate the world and create consciousness about the transformative power of color, whether it involves offices, factories, schools or homes. We want to become a global movement in which people genuinely start to see what color can do to inspire their physical and emotional environments." The program – which includes the ongoing Let's Color initiative – has already seen communities all over the world become involved in transforming their own neighborhoods by painting walls, houses and buildings. Favelas in Brazil, houses on a main street in Løgstor in Denmark, a community square in Jodhpur, India (see opposite page), and a school in Johannesburg, South Africa, are among the many areas to have been given a new lease of life, with many more to follow. "Color has the power to change people's lives," Gunning adds. "We hope to inspire many more people to become part of a tremendously exciting color movement which is rapidly gaining momentum."

During his few short years at AkzoNobel, Gunning's leadership ethos has certainly produced results. The company's US Decorative Paints business has been invigorated, while there are aggressive growth strategies in place in various high growth regions. Brazil, in particular, is benefiting from the incredible success of numerous local community initiatives designed to add color to people's lives. "Everything we're doing is based on a major drive for achievement," he stresses. "We know that great organizations perform better than average ones. That's why we're doing this. If we have smarter leaders and they work in a collective which is smarter than in other organizations, then of course we become a smarter business and we will win in the marketplace. We have to dare to grow." **A**