

HANGING THE MIRROR

*The Discipline of
Reflective Leadership*

Alan Scheffer Nancy Braun Mark Scheffer

The logo for Wisdom Editions features the word "Wisdom" in a stylized, gothic-style font with a small figure of a person standing on the letter 'i'. Below "Wisdom" is a horizontal line, and under the line is the word "Editions" in a similar gothic-style font.

Wisdom
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Minneapolis, Minnesota

Praise for *Hanging the Mirror*

...a work that will enlighten and inspire...an impressive book, one that is highly readable. The premise that leaders need to be “reflective” to be effective is played out in finely tuned, well-organized chapters. The authors’ keen insights, enhanced by liberal use of authoritative sources, pervade each chapter, offering leaders much to ponder. Wisely, the authors devote the majority of the book to self-reflection, guiding readers with relevant examples, sound counsel and end-of-chapter questions. Still, the authors broaden their concept to demonstrate how a reflective leader can help create a reflective organization. Deftly written and researched, perceptive and relevant; an important addition to leadership literature.

Kirkus Reviews

Hanging the Mirror is the most important book on leadership and management I have read in fifty years of hands-on work in the field. Clear, direct, yet deeply profound, it engages the reader in acknowledging what all truly successful leaders understand—that they themselves hold the key to fulfilling the potential of their enterprise.

*Richard Bauman, Retired Director, Oral and
Maxillofacial Services, US Pacific Command,
Department of Defense*

The world is in dire need of more effective leaders, and this powerful book gets to the heart of what makes or breaks leaders more than any other I have read.

*William B. Harley, President, Harley Consulting &
Coaching and author of Transformed: How to Make the
Decisions That Change Your Life*

This practical guide to leadership addresses all of life's relationships, from the boardroom to the breakfast table. We have used it as a blueprint for developing mission statements and strategic plans in our work in government, foundations, and non-profits.

*John Rochester, Presiding Circuit Judge, 40th Judicial
Circuit of Alabama*

*Linda Rochester, MSW, MA. Retired Director Clay
County Department of Human Resources*

To put it bluntly, leadership requires us to challenge the notion that we can directly motivate people through the exercise of power and authority, and instead asks us to use these resources to create a culture of true inclusion, recognition, and participation that engages the human spirit. *Hanging the Mirror* is a first step in that direction.

*Cliff Millard, Vice President of Operations, Jackson
Recovery Centers*

*This book is dedicated
to the many sincere leaders
with whom we have worked and grown.*



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HANGING THE MIRROR: The Discipline of Reflective Leadership.

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Foreword

This is a book about striving to change the world—you, us, all of humanity.

We came to truly understand this in the process of preparing the book's second edition. It was a natural time to take stock, and there was much for which to be grateful. We had been pleased by the degree that the book's principles had seemed to strike a chord with readers of varying ages, points in their career path, and levels of organizational authority. It had been used in a variety of creative ways, from formal trainings and new hire on-boardings to off-hours book clubs and personal study. Its message had found a home not only in industries ranging from manufacturing and finance to healthcare and nonprofits, but also in families, marriages, and friendships.

What gratified us most, perhaps, was the degree that people had been willing to rise to its central challenge: the notion that effective leadership requires not just outward techniques and approaches, but also inward development, refinement, and transformation. This challenge calls each of us to sincerely reflect on our behaviors, habits, beliefs, and values. It asks us to continually reassess who we are and how the choices we make impact every other human being with whom we come into contact. Reassessment is not an easy process. It demands daily effort and continuing vigilance. It also requires a willingness to not only

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acknowledge, but to actively search out our own prejudices, biases, faults, failings, and weaknesses. Not everybody is interested in furrowing the ground of the human heart in this way. But many are, and we had seen one after another take on this work with a sincerity and dedication that is worthy of the highest praise and commendation.

Steps such as these are vital to creating a healthier and more productive workplace culture. But as we reflected on our time in the organizational development field, we began to see that something more—something deeper and larger—was going on as well. Put simply, the challenges that hamper workplace after workplace are the very obstacles that we as a species are struggling with on a planetary basis. It is not uncommon to see organizations succumb to “we/they” types of thinking that erode capacity for effective action and fracture the collective identity into countless lines of division, opposition, and otherness. Struggles for power are rampant. Political maneuvering and manipulation are common. Broken, misleading, and inaccurate communications proliferate. Stereotyping and labeling. Suspicion, mistrust, conflict. Greed, ego, personal ambition. The list, sadly, goes on.

Dynamics such as these are every bit as destructive—and common—when playing out between nations as peoples as departments and site locations. Within the context of a workplace, the result might be attrition, turnover, insubordination, apathy, and most importantly, loss to organizational capacity. On a global scale these dysfunctional relationships lead to—or at the very least contribute to - humanity’s greatest contemporary challenges: war, hunger, poverty, ignorance, oppression, and prejudices of all kinds.

In the face of sobering realities such as these, it is important to recognize that humanity is also daily giving expression to the noblest elements of the human spirit. Examples of our capacity to unite, to heal, and to forge unity can be found in every land and every type of organization, as can our ability to

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manifest lofty qualities such as selflessness, love, compassion, and self-sacrifice for the betterment of the whole. Cynicism and despair should not be allowed to distort our vision or obscure the realities of the world as it exists today. To acknowledge only that which is coarse and base, to reflexively discount that which is beautiful and noble, is to embrace a fantasy no more accurate - and decidedly less useful—than the rose-colored utopia it claims to replace.

The reality is that both of these forces are at play in the world today. Processes of disintegration are eroding institutions, mindsets, and patterns of interaction and association that, while they may have served humanity in the past, have reached the limits of their usefulness. Simultaneously, in a growing number of arenas can be seen the first fitful efforts to build paradigms and patterns of life suited for the increasingly interconnected and interdependent world that lies ahead. In this light, the question is not—as people so often want to make it—a binary choice of whether things are getting better or getting worse. Rather, the complex interplay of these two forces illustrates the simple yet profound reality that the current generation is undergoing one of the most significant periods of transition ever witnessed in human history. Countless developments, from the technological and the social to the financial and political, are contributing to the changes advancing on every side and the turmoil they necessarily generate. Yet all of them seem, in one way or another, to be driven by a fundamental revolution in the way that human society is organized and, indeed, conceptualized. What was, at all previous points in human history, a multitude of tribes, clans, city-states, or nations, is becoming in practice one global civilization, albeit infinitely varied in secondary characteristics such as language, custom, culture, and history.

The challenge we face is that our thinking is lagging behind the rapid evolution taking place around us. In countless areas we

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are approaching the world, and indeed ourselves, as they existed decades or centuries ago. And these paradigms, assumptions, and mental models are trapping us in dysfunctional patterns of behavior at varying levels. Our focus here, of course, is on the workplace. But these problems bedevil the leaders of nations and the parents of families as much as the CEOs of corporations. The fundamental task before us, it becomes clear, is not attacking specific breakdowns one by one in this or that area. Rather it is building the behaviors, choices, attitudes, and beliefs that will be needed to carry humanity from its current stage of evolution to the next.

Our consulting business seeks to assist that process of maturation, one organization and one vision-driven leader at a time. Our conviction and experience has been that countless managers and executives long for a better world and would gladly pursue it through constructive changes in their workplace, beginning with themselves. Efforts in this direction can sometimes seem insignificant or irrelevant. Yet small steps, if they are regular and rapid, add up to a great distance traveled. For this reason we welcome anyone to the journey this book tries to explore - anyone from any background who is committed to offering his or her share toward an ever-advancing civilization.

Introduction

It is our conviction that business leaders today, seeking both personal development and organizational improvement, need to be challenged far more than they need to be trained or taught.

In our 25 years of consulting work numerous leaders have told us that they have been trained to death over the course of their careers. They say that they have learned various management systems, adopted diverse approaches, and yet seen little change in the fundamental dynamics of their organizations. They tell us, often with more than a hint of cynicism, that they have lost faith in such programs.

The reason this scenario plays out again and again is, we believe, quite simple. Most leadership development focuses almost exclusively on surface-level behaviors, giving tools, tips, and strategies designed to improve leaders' performance. What such approaches fail to take into account is the fact that action is invariably shaped by deeper paradigms, mental models, and value systems. Trying to change daily actions without addressing these underlying factors—as so many training programs seek to do—becomes an exercise in futility. Some level of short-term change can be achieved, but as enthusiasm inevitably wanes, ingrained habits and patterns of thought begin to reassert themselves. It becomes clear that the linchpin of sustainable leadership development—and therefore productive organizational change—is

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transforming not what leaders do, say, and decide, but what they believe, feel, and assume. The key, in short, is not what leaders do, but who leaders are.

The term “reflection” as we will use it in this book refers to the process by which all of us can become increasingly aware of the contours of our own thinking and reasoning. Learning to better identify and assess the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that give rise to our daily patterns of behavior is crucial to any process of ongoing transformation. It is also the central aim of this book.

Reflective leadership, then, can be thought of as the related processes of gaining both self-knowledge and self-mastery, with the goal of becoming an ever more effective leader of people. This discipline, which we call “hanging the mirror,” involves:

1. Candidly identifying the values and beliefs that shape our behavior
2. Objectively comparing those values to what is known through research about the practice of leading people effectively
3. Assessing our moment-by-moment leadership choices to determine what kind of assumptions and beliefs those choices reveal
4. Rethinking beliefs that run counter to tested knowledge, and replacing them with different and more knowledge-based choices

Hanging the Mirror is divided into several main sections. Chapters one through nine concentrate on individual leaders and the elements of a personal process of reflection. Chapters ten and eleven widen the scope of focus, addressing the challenge of making an entire system more reflective. And the final chapter explores in greater depth the nature of reflection as a

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“discipline”—an ongoing and long-term practice to which one commits him—or herself.

Our intention is for this book to be a practical tool that leaders can return to again and again in their efforts toward ongoing development. To that end, we have included questions to guide reflection at the end of every chapter. These provide a starting point for exploring both the principles presented and one’s own beliefs and values related to those principles. Some of the questions can be answered on the spot. Others might become clear after a few days’ thought. But most will require sustained attention and honest self-assessment over a period of months or even years. This is the nature of true reflection.

As we mentioned before, our consulting work has focused not on training or coaching leaders, but on challenging them. We have tried to retain that sense of challenge in this book. But hard as we may sometimes push, it is important to acknowledge that we do so not as experts holding the “answers” but simply as fellow travelers walking a common path of development. In the end, we, like you, are simply human beings trying to come to a better understanding of what it means to work in collaboration with other human beings.

Please join us in taking this journey.

1

Hanging the Mirror: It's All About You

In the early years of our consulting work, a CEO asked why he should fly us to San Diego instead of hiring a local consultant. Why, indeed, we thought, and began putting the question to long-time clients. Their responses provided ample food for thought, but one stood above all the rest. “You got us to stop looking at each other and start looking at ourselves,” said the president of one organization. “You pushed each of us to hang a mirror and really take a look at what we saw.”

As human beings, we all have our own mirror, our own capacity for mindfulness and reflection. This is a universal birthright, a defining feature of the humanity we share. But how many of us use this mirror to consciously and conscientiously assess our attitudes and behavior, and refine their impact on those with whom we come into contact on a regular basis?

Reflection is key to success, regardless of aim or activity. The athlete who fails to analyze his jump or throw will be hard pressed to improve his game, just as the teacher who neglects to ponder why students invariably struggle with a certain unit has little hope of seeing improved comprehension in the future. The process of dispassionately observing ourselves, analyzing the habits and behaviors we see, and revising those actions is critical

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to achieving sustainable improvement. Only if we know what we are doing—and avoid becoming enmeshed in the mirage of what we think we are doing or wish we were doing—can we hope to better our performance.

All of us engage in reflection. We do it every time we formulate a plan

Reflection on personal conduct is needed in many aspects of life, but perhaps in none so much as leadership.

and later look back to consider how well it served us. The question is how often we dig into more personal and interpersonal areas of reflection. How might our behavior be straining relationships with our children? How are our daily actions impacting interactions with our employees and coworkers? How faithfully are we living up to the ideals we champion with our words?

Reflection on personal conduct is needed in many aspects of life, but perhaps in none so much as leadership. Leaders, by definition, exercise authority over other people. That power invests their behavior with added weight and gives their reflection (or lack thereof) particular importance. Authority is what makes individuals leaders, but reflection—on-going, honest, and objective reflection—is what makes them effective leaders. It is the features of this ongoing reflection, the dynamics and challenges you will face in your efforts to walk a path of reflective leadership, that this book will address.

Why Leadership Matters

Years ago a group of Harvard Business School faculty considered a deceptively unassuming question: What leads to a prospering service organization? What elements are essential to building an outstanding enterprise and how do those elements relate to one another? Turning to best-practice strategies gleaned from industry-leading businesses, they set out to discover and document

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a “new economics of service.” But in the process, they ended up encountering a new and striking vision of leadership, a vision expressed “in terms rarely heard in corporate America.”

Their analysis, published in *Harvard Business Review* under the title “Putting the Service-Profit Chain to Work,” was no ode to touchy-feely management. Directed at practical-minded leaders, it sought to put “hard values on soft measures” so managers could target investments for maximum competitive impact. Nevertheless, their work revealed a thoroughly organic system steeped, at every level, in the humanity of its participants. “Anyone who looks at things solely in terms of factors that can easily be quantified is missing the heart of business, which is people,” remarked one CEO quoted in the research. It is people who design products, people who produce them, people who sell them, and people who purchase them. Business, it becomes clear, does not merely involve humanity, it *is* humanity. And the more clearly leaders can understand how feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (their own included) impact organizational performance, the more effectively they can build cultures of excellence.

Given the rigor and insight of this research, it is worth reviewing its key points and implications for a reflective leader.

The Impact of Loyal Customers

The Harvard group began by designating revenue as the bedrock of a healthy and thriving organization. A prospering business, they said, must generate enough income to support expansion, development, and continued growth. Even nonprofits and committedly mission-oriented organizations must secure revenue—whether from profits, donations, user fees, grants, or endowments—if they are to retain talent and achieve real-world results.

With that foundation in place, the first question became: what aspects of organizational functioning lead to the healthiest

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possible revenue stream? In answer, the group suggested that the *quality* of market share, measured in terms of customer loyalty, can influence profitability just as much as the *quantity* of share. Citing statistics estimating that a 5 percent increase in loyalty can increase revenue 25 to 85 percent, they demonstrated that the repeated patronage of loyal customers was a powerful source of lifetime revenue.

The loyalty they described was no small thing. Far outstripping common conceptions of preference or brand loyalty, it implied a depth of relationship in which “customers [are] so satisfied that they convert the uninitiated to a product or service.” So fervent was this devotion that the study referred to customers who displayed it as ‘apostles’ of a given organization.

Organizations that seek loyal customers, however, must first create consistently satisfied customers, the research found. Customer satisfaction emerged as the next link in the chain, but years of records tracking it on a five-point scale revealed a surprising twist. While ‘satisfied’ (level four) and ‘very satisfied’ (level five) customers might seem similar, the data showed a great, almost exponential, difference in loyalty. Such was the disparity that in one case, level-five customers were found to be six times more likely to repurchase equipment than level-four customers. These ‘very satisfied’ customers were those hard-won apostles whose loyalty often meant a lifetime of business.

Quality Isn't Enough

If satisfied customers lead to loyal customers and loyal customers lead to increased revenue, what leads to customer satisfaction? The answer, the study found, lay in creating value for customers, the value that comes from providing a consistently high quality of product and/or service.

All of us form impressions of value by comparing the costs we pay, both monetary and otherwise, with the results we receive.

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Price is critical to these comparisons, but so are perceptions of quality. A higher-priced mechanic might strike us as a better value than a comparably-skilled competitor simply because he is unfailingly friendly and willing to answer questions. A certain computer might seem to offer more value than a lower-priced equivalent because of its reputation for durability and reliability.

Quality is therefore central to perceptions of value, but to influence consumer behavior that quality must be uniform and dependable. It cannot be left to chance. If some experiences with a company are excellent, but others are mediocre or downright unpleasant, customers will rightly feel their satisfaction is not a priority. From the customer's point of view, quality and service are either consistent or they are nonexistent. A car that runs without problems nine days out of ten is not ninety percent acceptable, it is 100 percent unreliable. Similarly, an organization that leaves your experience as a customer up to chance deserves little acclaim. You might not object to the fact that your experience depends on the store location you visit or the employee who answers your call. You might even declare yourself satisfied with the organization. But you would not feel any particular affinity for it, nor would you go out of your way to recommend it to others. For organizations to distinguish themselves and create true customer loyalty, value must, in the eyes of customers, be delivered first time, every time.

The Role of Employees

Such standards of quality and value point squarely to employees as the next link in the chain. Employees—typically those at the very lowest levels of the organizational hierarchy—are the means by which services are delivered and products produced. They are the point where an organization's many policies, plans, and procedures culminate in a customer experience that is good, bad, or simply unmemorable. It is little surprise, then, that the Harvard

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group found that quality and value depended most directly on employees' productivity, loyalty, and ownership of their work.

Each of these closely interrelated factors is important in its own right. Productivity enables more work to be done in less time with less waste. Loyalty ensures that hard-won skills and relationships are not lost to turnover. But employee ownership—the feeling of doing one's own work as opposed to handling tasks assigned by the boss—is perhaps the most fundamental of the three. Ownership is the difference between investment and indifference, between working to accomplish something meaningful and working simply to receive a paycheck. It is the feeling of having a personal stake in something, and years of research have linked it to a range of salutary effects such as enthusiasm, productivity, loyalty, morale, and commitment.

All of us want to have responsibility over the work we do. We want to be able to *achieve* something, rather than just follow other people's directions. This is a truth, backed by the Harvard research, that suggests that the workplace condition employees value above all else is “the ability and authority . . . to achieve results for customers.” But this truth can also be easily validated through our own work experience. We all want ownership of the tasks that fill our days. When our organization allows such ownership, we work productively and strive to give our best because the work we do is ours, and not someone else's. And when it does not allow such ownership—and many do not—we throw up our hands and do only what is required to stay out of trouble.

Just as loyal customers must first be satisfied customers, the service-profit chain shows that employees with ownership over their work must first be satisfied with their job and position. Job satisfaction has long been an aim of many managers, but satisfaction, important as it is, is far from an end itself. Satisfied employees are, of course, preferable to dissatisfied ones. But just as satisfied customers were only a shadow of those

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“very satisfied” customers six times more likely to repurchase equipment, merely satisfied employees will never rival those who take active ownership of their work. To deliver consistent, exceptional quality and service, satisfaction is important, but ownership is imperative.

Culture: The Invisible Impact

Leaders long to see ownership, loyalty, and productivity in the systems they lead. They value it in workers and seek it in applicants. But while these qualities find expression in the conduct of individual employees, the most effective leaders know they are too important to be left to individual disposition. Ownership and investment must be woven into the fabric of an organization. They must be made a part of organizational culture.

Take a moment to think about the notion of culture. Derived from the Latin *colere*, “to cultivate,” it is a concept steeped in overtones of development and growth. In microbiology, a culture is the medium in which a tissue grows and reproduces, the means by which development becomes possible. In food production, a culture is that essential element that transforms milk into yogurt and juice into wine. Culture in this sense is vital, dynamic, and unfailingly alive.

Taken in the social sense, culture is just as vital. How projects are viewed, how information is shared, how departments interact with one another, how mistakes are handled, how questions are received—all these are expressions of organizational culture. Defining everything from how crises are handled to how coffee breaks are taken, culture makes organizations what they are. So pervasive is its influence that virtually no facet of organizational performance remains untouched by it.

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the attitudes of employees. In the service-profit chain, the Harvard group pegged the health of an organization’s culture to the views and

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perceptions of its employees, writing that the quality of a work environment is “measured by the feelings that employees have toward their jobs, colleagues, and companies.” They further noted that this environment is “characterized by the attitudes that people have toward one another and the way people serve each other inside the organization.”

Leaders tend to attribute behavior and attitude to individual employees, but culture plays a powerful role in shaping workplace dynamics. A social service agency we once worked with, for example, had absorbed a small provider of similar services. Because the organization being acquired was free from many of the problems—criticism, negativity, backbiting—that plagued the parent organization, the partnership created considerable excitement. But all too soon the fresh attitudes and excitement began to disappear as the new staff came into contact with the old. “In the beginning they were so positive and constructive,” one executive said with a weary sigh, not six months after the start of the partnership. “Now they’re just like us.”

Culture—the shared norms, values, expectations, and ways of getting things done that characterize an organization—changes people. It can bring out the best in workers, but it can also destroy model employees. Culture is what determines the human resources a leader has to work with and, ultimately, the organizational performance he or she will be able to

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achieve. The difference between average organizations and outstanding ones, then, is not one of personnel but of culture.

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The Wake of Leadership

We once ate in a restaurant with exceedingly good service. When we told our waitress how impressed we were, she replied without hesitation, “Oh, that’s the manager. He’s always talking about customer service, having meetings about it, encouraging us. It’s really important to him.”

Though only a few years into the workforce, this young waitress already knew what the authors of the service-profit chain found in their research: that workplace culture can always be traced back to the decisions of leaders. Far from a phenomenon arising of its own accord, culture is the inescapable product of leadership behavior and choices. It is established by leaders’ every question and remark, shaped by their every decision and offhand comment. It is the byproduct of their organizational authority, the wake of their leadership.

Whether they realize it or not, leaders are creating culture at every moment of every workday. They could not

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stop if they tried. The challenge, then, is not how to build workplace culture, but how to guide what is already being built, how to shape it into something beneficial and vigorous. We sometimes tell our clients that culture

can be likened to a leader’s back yard. With attention and effort, the potential of the land can be harnessed to produce beautiful flowers and needed fruits. But if the plot is ignored or neglected, the problem is not that nothing will grow there. The problem is that anything and everything will grow there.

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Without care and attention, the yard will become choked with the vegetation of seeds blown in from the outside world, bits of garbage tossed in by passers-by, and undergrowth planted years ago which has spread unchecked ever since. It will become a hodgepodge of the counterproductive, the inconsequential, and the fortuitously beneficial.

The issue then becomes how leaders can best build productive cultures, how they make sure their yard is helping them instead of hindering them. Things like organizational structure and design, internal systems and policies, and formal statements of philosophy, mission, and values have their place, says Edgar Schein, one of the foremost authorities on workplace culture. But he and others suggest that the day-to-day behaviors employees see exhibited by their leaders are far more influential determinants of culture. What leaders pay attention to and measure, how they respond to organizational crises, the things they coach and model are what truly determine the contours of a working environment, they say. A vision statement describes what leadership wishes a culture to be; their daily behavior determines what it actually is.

Workplace culture is a force leaders cannot afford to underestimate. Approached with determination and intentionality, it can instill in employees ownership, satisfaction, and attention to quality. But if culture is haphazard and personality-driven (as in many organizations), its effects can range from apathy and underachievement to dysfunction and calamity. So potent are its effects that Schein went so far as to suggest the possibility that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.”

This is a dramatic, almost revolutionary reframing of the role of leadership. Leaders know they are responsible for bottom line tangibles like patrons served, beds filled, units sold, and dollars earned. Many know that these factors depend on issues

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of quality and value. But because many are unaware of the power of organizational culture to create the employee ownership and investment that lead to consistent quality and value, they resort to strict oversight or elaborate systems of quality control. They end up relying on micromanagement which is as inefficient as it is ultimately self-defeating.

Leaders are indeed responsible for results, but they best achieve these results not by the eagle eye of managerial oversight, but by creating a culture in which employees are enthused about the outcomes they are pursuing. In short, excellence of product, service, and human performance depend first, foremost, and beyond all else on excellence of culture.

A Responsibility of Every Leader

Leaders are constantly creating organizational culture, continuously shaping a working environment that does or does not lead to employee ownership and enthusiasm, that does or does not conduce to quality service and superior products, that does or does not ensure an outstanding customer experience. Culture building is therefore a prime target for leadership reflection and analysis. “Most people take culture as a given,” remarked one CEO in the service-profit chain article. “It is around you, the thinking goes, and you can’t do anything about it. However, when you run a company, you have the opportunity to determine the culture. I find that when you champion the noblest values . . . employees rise to the challenge, and you forever change their lives.”

But true as these words are, culture is not just the responsibility of senior leadership. Every person with supervisory oversight determines culture for the people he or she oversees. Every shop foreman and care manager, every crew leader, site supervisor and front-line manager shapes the organizational environment of his or her direct reports. To achieve organizational excellence, then, every leader—and not just the person in the corner office—is

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obliged to reflect on the culture he or she is building day in and day out. Are you, as a leader, consciously directing your efforts toward a culture of service or innovation or compassion? Are you intentionally making decisions that reinforce a productive working environment? Or are you simply accepting whatever culture happens to evolve in the workplace? Your organization may survive the latter. It may carry on and few may complain. But far, far more is within reach.

Reflection in Practice - One Simple Question

That leaders determine culture and that culture determines performance is clear. Leaders create the conditions that influence whether risk is embraced or avoided, whether questions are valued or discouraged, whether information is shared or hoarded. They do this not through any inherent superiority, but simply because of the organizational authority they hold. Authority is the primary distinction between bosses and employees—it is arguably the *only* distinction between them—and the way a person exercises that authority determines in large part how effectively he or she will lead.

In our years of consulting we have found that the answer to one question will tell a great deal about the culture that exists in an organization. That question is: To what extent do leaders use their authority *for* employees or *on* them?

Organizations in which employees feel that leaders use their authority for them—protecting them, facilitating their work, supplying them with resources—are usually focused, cohesive, and optimistic about the future. Organizations in which employees feel that leadership uses its authority on them—isolating them, intimidating them, using their work to further personal agendas—are usually characterized by resentment, apathy, and conflict.

Personal and ongoing reflection on this one simple question—how you exercise your authority as a leader and to what ends you turn it—is a cornerstone of the process of hanging the mirror.

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Questions to Ponder – Culture

- How would I describe the culture in which my employees work? How would my employees describe it? Have I asked my employees how they see it? In what ways do our views differ?
- In what ways am I creating culture every day? What are my primary impacts on my organization's culture? What could I do or stop doing that would improve the culture? How would my employees answer these questions? Have I asked my employees?
- Is our culture distinguished by its excellence? Does it bring out the best in people? What percentage of my time is spent consciously creating a culture that cause employees to bring their best to the workplace?
- To what extent do I use my power and authority for my employees versus on them? How would my employees answer this question? Have I asked my employees?

“If you enjoyed reading this section of Hanging the Mirror, and would like to purchase it now, click [HERE](#).”