

Leading Today

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At JMW, we have dedicated ourselves to developing extraordinary leaders through the pathway of “discovering for oneself.” Through our many years of experience, we have learned that this approach makes a profound difference to those seeking behavioral change and accelerated performance. Leadership is an art and a science—not a recipe or formula. In this series, we’ll look at a variety of perspectives regarding leadership that may allow you to discover what it takes to be a leader in today’s environment. Fundamentally, effective leaders make a decisive impact every day.

Why is this discussion especially important now? The current circumstances have unexpectedly left many leaders blindsided, unhinged, and untethered. Many companies face bleak times whether challenged by being a significantly smaller business to conducting business in new ways to overwhelming staff with challenges they have never faced before. For many of us, there was a place to anchor ourselves—a future you could predict and even create. Now there seems to be more uncertainty than ever. Dealing effectively with the normal ups and downs of the marketplace is not a new economic challenge, however the additional concern for the life, health, and safety of people is unprecedented. The challenge facing leaders today is successfully navigating through this year and determining what their businesses will look like in the future.

This series of provocations will not be the answer, but rather seeks to open new thinking that may challenge you to discover new possibilities for yourself, your organization, and for the future of your companies.

Very bright people may need only be disturbed or disrupted, ... shaken up, ... challenged, questioned deeply, bothered, to have them bring new insights to existing knowledge.

Chris Argyris

There are an overwhelming number of people writing on this subject right now and providing their best advice, techniques, tried and true methods and processes. These tips are all useful, but can you apply them so that you reliably make the difference you want to make? You might reply ... it depends. Let’s not rehash what we know or don’t know. Let’s dive into the realm of what we don’t know that we don’t know—that which is blind to us and limits our view of what is possible.

To begin this provocation, consider this perspective:

Effective leaders and leadership may be more a function of where one is oriented than what one knows.

Let’s discuss two distinct orientations you may not have considered: **Leading from the stands and leading from the field.**

Leading from the Stands

One of my clients said it best, “Leading from the stands is very different from leading from the playing field.”

What is he talking about?

What’s meant by leading from the stands? Go back to a time when you attended a large event with a lot of people gathered, like a baseball game. There you are, sitting in your seat in the stands, watching and observing all that’s happening. From this perspective, you see many things to comment on, offer opinions about, judge and evaluate. You might even shout out a litany of non-stop assessments of the players, the umpires, the plays, the team managers and even the score.



What gets unnoticed in all this musing is that nothing you think about or say—even said wisely or loudly—makes a difference to the game itself happening on the field. There’s nothing wrong with this chatter; it’s appropriate from the point of view you have of the game. Consider however, that your speaking does not trickle down to the players on field or alter the plays or the scoreboard. If winning means you score more points than your opponent, and this orientation cannot affect winning, then it makes no difference—or said more plainly—offers no reliable approach to making a decisive impact in the world.

How does this discussion apply to leadership and management? Leaders and managers often fall into the same orientation—unwittingly observing performance at work. They hypothesize, criticize, judge, evaluate, point fingers, blame, assess, complain, report—and like the game watcher—have hopes of impacting people and their performance, but ultimately fall short. Why? This orientation does not have the purpose, power or positioning to alter the views and actions of the players, and ultimately, the results.

Especially during these times, the pull to lead from the stands is stronger than ever. Some leaders unintentionally retreat to the highest seat they can find and yell the loudest from afar. What other choice does a leader have?

Leading from the Field

If leading from the stands does not offer power to impact performance such that desired results are achieved, then what does? Leading from the field. What does it look like to be a leader on the playing field? You probably don't have an answer to this question, and that's the point I want you to get. There are no answers or formulas to apply on the field, there's only being on the field in the game and working it out from there. While this isn't an answer, it's something new to consider.



The application of answers or formulas are past-based solutions to problems that have already happened. The actions leaders generated that worked were invented and enacted in the moment

and explained afterwards. Then someone said, "That worked! Write that down and pass it along." Ergo a formula for success, the next book.

How do you lead from the playing field?

You set aside what you already know intentionally. You have experienced what I'm pointing to. Take a moment and think of a day at work when you said to yourself, "I made a difference today. I altered an undesirable outcome to a different one and that made a decisive positive impact." What was your experience of yourself, your people, and your job? Was it like a sense of being productive, satisfied, effective? Able to move the world around you? Did that sense of yourself carry over to those with whom you touched outside of work? I bet you know what I'm talking about. You were not applying some formula or merely some theory you picked up on your leadership journey; you were being a leader in the game leading from the field. While you may have experienced more discomfort and risk, you may also have found your way into this arena of leadership.

How do you move from the stands to leading from the field?

You make that commitment and choice. You commit to getting on the field and notice what comes out of your mouth—speaking that explains or speaking that fosters action.

Working side by side with others, you intentionally speak and listen to others from a commitment to discovering and inventing rather than knowing or confirming. From there you create the next moves. As you make that commitment, you may find yourself and others seeing new and different actions to take not previously considered. The co-creation of actions you and your staff generate builds an environment for results beyond the circumstances.

Be mindful that your orientation is a moment-to-moment choice. Here are two practices to work on that will put you in the game:

Stop: Telling or narrating
Start: Asking and making requests

Unclear? Probably because there is no instruction sheet to follow, just consider going to work tomorrow and start experimenting. See if you can—at will—orient yourself to leading from the field to discover your next moves. See if you and others are more enlivened and stronger in the face of the circumstances.

One final thought. Discover for yourself that leading from the field makes you a player in the game and from there the future looks very different.

About the authors



Harvey Dubin has been providing consulting services and leadership development for leaders with big commitments who believe that the human element is the decisive factor in organizational performance. For over 35 years, he has been dedicated to people and their performance worldwide.

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