MISSION-CRITICAL LEADERSHIP

HOW SMART MANAGERS LEAD WELL IN ALL DIRECTIONS

JON LOKHORST

THE INSIDE TRACK FOR ASCENDING LEADERS

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Whenever just a first name is used in this book in a story, the story is based on a true story but the names and certain details have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The story is merely being used to illustrate a point. If the story is fictional, that is duly noted.

Designed by Joni McPherson, mcphersongraphics.com

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

Why It's Important To Lead Well In All Directions

M ost people have never heard of Dorothy Vaughan. Even fewer people would know about Vaughan if not for her portrayal by the award-winning actress, Octavia Spencer, in the much-lauded 2016 film, *Hidden Figures*. Although she died in 2008, Vaughan stands out as an exemplary leader for us today.

Vaughan overcame gender and racial barriers to become a respected leader at NASA during the space race of the 1960s and 1970s. She began her career as a high school math teacher before joining the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA, the predecessor to NASA) in 1943. She was a human computer, running complex mathematical calculations, mostly by hand, to provide data for NASA's scientists and engineers.

Vaughan was assigned to a unit called the West Area Computing Group, or West Computers, at Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia. As depicted in *Hidden Figures*, Vaughan and her colleagues worked in offices segregated from their white counterparts.

Vaughan was noticed for her technical expertise and, in 1949, she was promoted to a leadership role as acting supervisor of the West Computers. She was the first African American manager at NASA. It took several years, though, for her to get the "acting" part of her title dropped and officially become a supervisor. The movie depicts Vaughan's persistent, upward leadership toward her boss, to gain that recognition.

Vaughan stewarded her leadership role well. She advocated for increasing women's opportunities at the agency. She inspired her team to excel and worked to improve their working conditions. After learning the FORTRAN programming language, Vaughan taught it to many of her team members as they anticipated that electronic computers would soon perform calculations they had previously performed manually.[4]

Vaughan also leveraged her role to lead across the organization, collaborating with colleagues on other projects critical to the space race, such as the development of a handbook for using algebraic methods on calculating machines. Engineers sought her recommendations to match projects with the best workers for the job. She often used her influence to seek promotions and pay raises for deserving women in other departments.[5]

Amid all her accomplishments, Vaughan never lost sight of the mission for which she worked. She later described her work as being on "the cutting edge of something very exciting."[6] Vaughan and her team made critical contributions to United States space exploration. One could argue that without Vaughan's West Computers, NASA would never have achieved President John F. Kennedy's vision of landing a man on the moon.

What can you learn from Dorothy Vaughan's legacy?

The best leaders never lose sight of their mission.

They build positive working relationships while delivering crucially important results.

They lead well in all directions throughout their organizations.

They embody Mission-Critical Leadership.

Mission-Critical Leadership: What Is It, And Why Is It What's Next?

In my work with leaders, I occasionally come across those who describe themselves as "old school." Often, these leaders include my peers from the baby boomer generation, who lament a perceived lack of work ethic among younger workers—millennials often being the target. They make statements such as, "When I was their age…" and continue with stories of walking a mile to school barefoot in five feet of snow. At least that's the version they use here in my home state of Minnesota.

Old-school thinking did not get us to the moon and back. Old-school leadership did not open the doors to space-related innovations like the Hubble Telescope and the International Space Station (ISS), and it won't produce the new ideas and innovation necessary to advance the workplace of the future.

Still, there are old-school leaders who hang onto a "command and control" style of leadership from decades ago. "These kids are so entitled," they might say about their younger workers. "Don't they realize they need to pay their dues like I did?" Or, "They need to stop complaining and just do their jobs." Then the old-school leaders wonder why younger workers are prone to change jobs more often.

Unfortunately, remnants of that stagnated mentality remain in the workplace. The mentality usually shows up in a lack of investment in leadership development. Many companies fear training their leaders, only to have them leave for other jobs.

This dilemma reminds me of a meme that made its way around social media a while ago:

> *CFO to CEO: What happens if we invest in developing our people and then they leave?*
>
> *CEO to CFO: What happens if we don't, and they stay?*

The CFO in this conversation doesn't realize that making the investment in people is one of the best ways to retain top talent.

> Talent retention and leadership
> development go hand in hand.

Both were rated as major concerns among human resource executives prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that was declared in early 2020. In surveys conducted between December, 2019 and January, 2020, more than half of 300 such executives surveyed said that retaining key talent was their biggest worry, followed by developing leaders and succession planning.[7]

Then Came The Year 2020

The first two decades of the twenty-first century were replete with forces of rapid change. Technological advances brought the age of digitalization. These advances also broke down geographic barriers to make the marketplace an increasingly global one.

A new generation of workers, the millennials, entered the job market with a vigor to reshape the workplace. Companies such as Amazon, Apple, and Netflix transformed entire industries with new products, services, and business models.

2020 had such a nice ring to it, didn't it? The term "twenty-twenty vision" had a positive tone and was a great setup for leaders to set ambitious goals for the new year and decade ahead. In January, most parts of the economy were growing and the stock market was humming along with them.

It wasn't long, though, before a new word entered our vernacular: coronavirus. In the early days of the new year, the virus and the disease it caused, COVID-19, seemed obscure and far away, other than in parts of the world where it was spreading.

Within weeks, however, COVID-19 became a force to reckon with across the entire world. In early March, the outbreak was declared a pandemic. From a health perspective, there hadn't been anything like it since the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic killed an estimated 500 million people worldwide. The COVID-19 outbreak brought serious health ramifications across the globe—and the implications went far beyond health concerns.

The global economy took a sharp downward turn as businesses in many industries closed or cut back. Workplaces made abrupt shifts as shelter-in-place and work-from-home became a new normal. The crisis brought vast changes that will be long lasting and, in many cases, permanent.

Your Best Leadership Is More Essential Than Ever

Our workplaces will never be the same. Organizational life is being reshaped more rapidly than any time in history. As a leader, you are leading in an environment that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). This acronym was first used by the United States Army War College in 1987 to describe the rapidly changing world as the Cold War between the United States and Soviet

Union came to an end.[8] Subsequently, the concept has been used in many industries to describe the current challenges facing organizational leaders.

There is no better way to describe organizational life today. Our VUCA environment will stretch your leadership skills beyond what you can imagine. Are you ready to face the challenge?

What Is Mission-Critical Leadership?

John Maxwell offers the simplest definition of leadership, boiled down to one word. "The true measure of leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less," he writes in the widely read book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*.[9] Maxwell's one-word description captures the key ingredient of leadership that compels people to behave or act in a certain way.

From an organizational perspective, it's crucial to incorporate a sense of action when defining leadership. Consider what psychologist, speaker, and author Dr. Henry Cloud says: "Leadership is basically getting from here to there."[10] The word "there" implies direction, vision, and goals. Cloud's paradigm is useful to describe leading at a macro level; for instance, when running an entire organization. It is also helpful at a micro level; for instance, when leading a team or project.

Cloud also emphasizes the two Rs of leadership: results and relationships.[11] It takes a mastery of both to be effective

as a leader. Few leaders are evenly balanced between the two. Leaders who lean heavily toward results accomplish the goal, but if they're not self-aware, they risk devaluing or burning out their team members. Leaders who lean more heavily toward relationships can fall into the trap of people pleasing or overcollaborating, at the cost of progress toward the ultimate goal.

Effective leadership requires the right blend of effort toward results and relationships. It also requires a mindset of leading in all directions within one's organization.

> Most leadership development is focused on a singular direction within an organization—downstream in the hierarchy.

The best leaders, like Dorothy Vaughan, recognize the need to lead upward to their superiors and also across to their peers; and they start by leading themselves well.

Now that we have a better understanding of leadership in general, what do we mean by "Mission Critical"? The term conveys a focus on an organization's lifeblood and the factors that are essential for it to accomplish its mission and purpose. Impairment of those factors puts the organization at serious risk of decline or even survival.

At pivotal moments, when the stakes are high, leaders who focus on what's mission critical cut through the clutter, clear away distractions, and ensure their teams are devoted

to what's truly essential. That's how Vaughan led her West Computers team.

Combining these concepts, I define Mission-Critical Leadership as:

Using influence to build relationships and deliver results in all directions within an organization, accelerating it faster and further toward its mission.

Why would I open the book with a story about leadership from the United States space program? After all, I am not an astronaut, engineer, or scientist—nor do I play one on television. My interest in the space program dates back to my childhood, watching Neil Armstrong become the first human to set foot on the moon.

Ever since then, I have been fascinated by the high-risk, high-reward nature of space exploration. There is little to no margin for error when you lead in that environment. Your leadership could mean the difference between life and death. This mode of leading successfully in a high-risk environment is the epitome of Mission-Critical Leadership.

That's why this book includes space-related examples of leadership, along with stories from the marketplace and from my personal experience.

Why Does Mission-Critical Leadership Matter?

Employee engagement in United States workplaces continues to flounder. In their last prepandemic survey, Gallup found that only 35 percent of workers were "highly involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace." Surprisingly, that was announced as good news, representing the highest level of engagement since Gallup began tracking the measure in 2000.[12] That's only about one-third of employees.

Thirteen percent of workers were actively disengaged— unhappy campers who at times sabotage their employers' efforts. That leaves slightly over one-half of workers in the middle, which Gallup refers to as "not engaged."[13] I call it the "meh" category: workers who show up, go through the motions, and collect a paycheck, with no additional effort.

Numerous studies show that employee engagement is a proven driver of positive business outcomes. Organizations with higher levels of employee engagement are more productive, profitable, and innovative than their competition. They achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction and even experience fewer workplace-related injuries.[14]

So what is the key driver of employee engagement? It's competent leadership. The relationship a worker has with his or her supervisor is paramount. Gallup's research indicates that managers account for at least 70 percent of employee engagement.[15]

The mantra is true: "Employees join organizations and leave bosses." Effective leadership is essential—up, down, and across the organizational chart.

Poor working relationships with coworkers are another major source of frustration among employees. 5 Dynamics, a provider of human performance systems, found that nearly 60 percent of employees work in teams to some degree. Of those, 41 percent mentioned they experience friction in working with colleagues, and about one-third of them have considered looking for another job due to a negative team environment.[16] Leading effectively among peers is the antidote to this frustration.

Some would argue the large number of unemployment claims during the pandemic diminish concerns about employee turnover. As a result, they suggest, there may be more candidates available than at any time since the Great Recession of 2007–2009. Remember, the economy recovered the number of jobs lost during the Great Recession within five years and experienced substantial job gains after that.[17]

As I write this chapter, economists are assessing what type of recovery will follow the pandemic-induced recession. How long it will take to return to near-full employment is a matter of debate. However, risking the loss of top people by betting on the ability to replace them adequately is short-sighted.

Furthermore, the baby boomer generation is rapidly exiting the workplace. The United States Census Bureau reports that about 10,000 baby boomers reach age sixty-five

every day. By 2030, nearly all workers from the baby boomer generation will cross that threshold.[18]

Leadership development is a viable mission in and of itself. Organizations that make it a priority will have a solid pipeline of future leaders for years to come. Individuals who invest in their own leadership development make themselves viable candidates to advance to the next level of leadership within their organizations.

Getting astronauts to a destination off-planet is the kind of organizational mission that drives everybody to excel, and it offers a wealth of leadership examples that are inspiring, insightful, and illustrative of best practices. These lessons can be applied in organizations from nonprofits to educational institutions to corporations.

What's your mission?

MISSION-CRITICAL TAKEAWAYS

1. Watch the movie *Hidden Figures*. Observe positive and negative leadership in action from each of the main characters.

2. Identify the VUCA forces most relevant to your industry and organization. Consider how those forces shape your need for leadership development.

3. Determine what "mission critical" means for leadership in your organization and your role in helping it move further and faster toward its mission.