

What Elephants Can Teach Us About Being Great Leaders

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Bear with me. In our search for a definitive list of the attributes we need to lead a business we look at the world for inspiration and the natural, wild one can give us some interesting insights: working together like wolves, adapting like chameleons, the work ethic of ants. You get the idea.

When I posed this question to my peers, the discussion was vibrant (after a little eye-rolling). It sparked endless debates, questions, and opening of minds. It made us think of nothing else. Welcome to the jungle.

Wildlife can show remarkable leadership skills, none more so than the serene elephant. Descended from mammoths, elephants are the largest mammal on the planet but despite their size, they are also considered a symbol of loyalty, wisdom, and unity. Here's what we can learn from this matriarchal society.

Connectedness

Elephant society is built around the matriarch and female elders. This leadership team is the glue that unifies the herd. How do they do it? Communication. Elephants are excellent communicators, continuously 'talking' through vibrations (inaudible to the human ear) as well as the more well-known trumpeting and harrumphing.

The constant reassurance from the matriarch through everything that she does keeps the individual elephants focused on the task at hand, whether searching for water or protecting the young. She does not lead through fear, she is guiding her herd through the respect and trust that she has earned.

We know that communication is a key element in maintaining and nurturing team connections, in leading them to success. Teams that communicate openly and frequently are proven to be more innovative, productive, and effective.

What is often forgotten is listening. A crucial component in communicating, taking the time to listen to your employees, and consider their feedback in moving your organization forward leads to better problem-solving and a more agile business in the long-term.

Teamwork

Known for their empathy and cooperation, elephants sense when another in the herd needs help and then knows what to do to help. A matriarch values each member of her herd, understands everyone's value, and ensures that everyone else understands it as well.

They also embrace each other's individuality, they are self-aware. Elephants can recognize themselves in a mirror, a trait only shared with great apes and bottlenose dolphins. Did you know that they can also be left- or right-trunked? My point? It is important to know where your strengths lie. It is also important to know when to use them.

What does this teach us? That embracing our individuality, our unique personality and ability, can lead us to be better connected when everyone understands the value of each other, whatever rank and whoever they are. In business, trust in and respect for each other are key attributes in working together to create a compassionate culture, allowing leaders to lead

with empathy.

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Future-proofing

On-the-job training and career development are also evident when you reflect on how elephant herds live. The matriarch teaches other elephants where the best waterholes are, how to protect the herd, and so on. They do not keep this information to themselves, they impart it to others so that the future of the herd is protected. Their elders teach them everything that they need to know about being an elephant.

This reminds us that knowledge is power. Power to be innovative and effective in the long term, but only if it is shared. Everyone is learning every day. Just think of all the lessons we have learned from the coronavirus pandemic and how that has affected us. Listening and sharing these lessons is how leaders can learn and connect, future-proofing their organization and planning succession.

Our lesson? It is wise to accept help from others, seek out mentors and advice from people who we admire, learning new skills and perspectives.

Tread lightly

Elephants may be the largest land animals on earth, but they walk so gently that you barely hear them. They shape their habitat as part of the cycle of the eco-system, leaving as light a footprint as possible on their world.

What does this tell us? A life lesson to walk gracefully through life. As a leader it is not necessarily about being the big 'I am.' To explain more eloquently I bow to one of my favorite quotes on leadership from Lao Tzu, "a leader is best

when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

It also tells us that however large an organization we are, it is essential that we tread as lightly on our planet as we can. We are responsible for our effect on social and environmental well-being, on benefitting the wider community. At its base, it is our moral obligation, yet effectively engaging a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) or ESG (Environmental, Social & Governance) strategy leads to customer and client engagement, loyalty and trust.

Social intelligence

In looking to the future, our talent is more often than not, our competitive advantage. The right person with the right attitude, personality and soft skills to fit with the team creating connectedness and purpose. Elephants do not dominate. They do not lead through fear, rather through respect and shared responsibility.

This requires self-awareness, social skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Elephants maintain authentic relationships with others in their herd through a close social network of work and play. The herd trusts the matriarch because of these bonds, acting as one unit as they follow her lead.

The same is true in business. Social intelligence is crucial in leading your team, in shaping your culture. First, a leader needs to be self-aware of what they do best and where to improve. They need to be open and honest (no leader is perfect), not always having the answers but communicating clearly. They need to understand their teams, their customers, their business, and respond appropriately.

This authenticity and openness will empower the people around you, and innovation and opportunity emerge.

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Enjoy life

There's nothing better than watching a two-hundred pound newborn elephant playing at a watering hole, splashing around with its family without a care in the world. This is pure fun. It is a small thing, but it counts.

And we all need reminding of this sometimes. Personal well-being is paramount, for yourself as a leader but also for your team. By creating a place people want to work, feel safe and a place where they can have fun, will reap the rewards in terms of employee engagement and productivity.

Confident and compassionate, elephants serve as an incredible example for leaders who want to develop and lead better. So next time that nature documentary flashes on your television screen or you are lucky enough to observe an animal in the wild, ask yourself what you can learn. You never know...

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