

2014

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Recommended Citation

Summerfield M. Leadership: Three Key Employee-Centered Elements With Case Studies. *Inov Pharm.* 2014;5(3): Article 166.
<http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/innovations/vol5/iss3/6>

INNOVATIONS in pharmacy is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Leadership: Three Key Employee-Centered Elements With Case Studies

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*Innovations in pharmacy is publishing “Leadership: Three Key Employee-Centered Elements With Case Studies” as a four-part series; this is Part Four. The serial based on the book “Leadership: Three Key Employee-Centered Elements With Case Studies” is available on www.amazon.com.

Prologue: Responsiveness

Responsiveness represents the third of the three key employee-centered elements of leadership. A common definition of “Responsiveness” is “responding with emotion to people and events.”

“A responsive leader is a person who is able to identify both the explicit and implicit needs of people . . . and uses his understanding of those needs to try and fulfill them, whenever required.”¹

Unlike Bill Clinton and Abraham Lincoln, who are household names, the name Maurice Cheeks is not. The chapter describes Mr. Cheeks’ ability to recognize a need, respond quickly, and make a difference in a little girl’s life.

Responsiveness, like gratitude, is a modality that has value in-and-of-itself and also supports connection.

The “business” of pharmacy, regardless of the setting, is complex. Almost every practice setting comprises clinical, operations, personal, personnel, financial, safety, technological, and service components. Few doubt the number of opportunities to improve any one of these components.

Pharmacists and technicians understand the key aspects of their jobs and want to participate in improving these components. For example, a pharmacist wants to share a safety measure he/she learned about at a meeting, a technician wants to rearrange the drugs to improve efficiency, or a technician requests an emergency leave-of-absence. A responsive leader reacts.

Pharmacists and technicians don’t always expect approval, but they do expect acknowledgment and an explanation, if possible. Pharmacists and technicians bemoan, “I didn’t expect for my suggestion to be adopted, but I’m disappointed that I didn’t get a response.”

Responsiveness is not only reactionary; it can be anticipatory, i.e., reacting to “implicit” needs. A leader can see a need and react without being summoned.

Redeploying human resources, either pharmacists, technicians, or managers, to assist stressed colleagues during a predictable or unpredictable busy time, either explicitly or implicitly, is a common example of responding effectively in pharmacy practice to provide more timely and safer care.

Responsiveness can make a difference in the lives of our colleagues, our employees, and our patients.

1. Sridhar B. Leadership by Responsiveness, *The Hindu: National Newspaper Online edition of India’s National Newspaper*.
<http://www.thehindujobs.com/0406/2004063000240300.htm>. 2004 Jun 30.

Chapter 4: Responsiveness

awareness • sensitivity • alertness • confidence • reactivity • accessibility • being interested

Responsiveness combats anonymity and irrelevance.

The name Maurice (Mo) Cheeks is not a household term, but avid basketball fans recognize the name. Mo Cheeks was born in 1956 in Chicago, Illinois, played basketball for West Texas State University, and was drafted by the Philadelphia 76ers in 1978. Cheeks played in the National Basketball Association (NBA) for fifteen years, eleven years for the 76ers. After his playing career, he started coaching.¹ A fair-minded assessment is that he was a near-great player, a good coach, and a superb humanitarian.

No description of the event that transpired on April 27, 2003, matches the one by journalist Robert J. Elisberg, published six years after the event. The following is truncated and

paraphrased for conciseness. At the time of the event, Mo Cheeks served as coach of the NBA Portland Trailblazers.

“Today is the sixth anniversary of Maurice Cheeks’ moment on the pedestal. For sheer emotional joy, it’s hard to top what happened on April 27, 2003, before Game 4 of the NBA playoffs. The Portland Trailblazers and Dallas Mavericks prepared for their playoff game to start. Stepping out onto the court was Natalie Gilbert, a 13-year-old girl. Just another national anthem, just another youngster who won a contest, just another two minutes the crowd wanted to get past for the game they were there to see. And she started fine. Except that a few lines in, the high pageantry of the moment got her, and something went very wrong. She totally forgot the words. A young 13-year old child, standing in front of over 10,000 people, lost. Alone. And that’s when Maurice Cheeks showed the kind of person he was.”ⁱⁱ

Just at the moment of high-anxiety and despair, Mo Cheeks sweeps into the scene, places his left hand reassuringly on Natalie’s shoulder and starts singing. It doesn’t take Natalie long to recapture her poise and her stride. Then Cheeks makes a series of decisions that embodies the nature of responsiveness. He gently lifts the microphone twice to Natalie’s mouth, reestablishing a sense of normality and silently messaging, *This is yours to do. You can do it. Carry on.* Once she starts to roll again, he does not leave, probably for fear of a repeat. Natalie froze once; Cheeks wasn’t going to allow it to happen again. Cheeks keeps his hand on Natalie’s shoulder as a constant reminder that he is there, supporting her physically and emotionally, delicately balancing the need to be there for her versus the hazard of detracting from her spotlight. Then, he signals to the crowd to join in, establishing a sense of community. Cheeks simultaneously displays confidence and humility by unashamedly singing off-key, knowing that under the circumstances, his tonality did not matter.

Now view:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Em9wR9e5emY>

Exhibiting what is now known as a “Mo Cheeks’ moment,” he demonstrated the essence of his character and his leadership. Well, what change did he drive? First, he dramatically changed the course of that event. Plus, he changed the

course of Natalie’s life. When interviewed on *Good Morning, America*, she proudly announced that the “worst moment of her life” turned into “the best moment of my life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

At the Trailblazers/Mavericks game, it is likely that all present were aware of Natalie’s gaffe. It is also likely that all had the feelings of discomfort and empathy. So why was Mo Cheeks the first of the ten thousand people in the arena to respond? It’s unlikely that a statistical anomaly produced Cheeks—that his “number was drawn.” It is more likely that Mo Cheeks not only deeply understood the nature of leadership, but he also understood that his role demanded a heightened level of awareness, poise, and dynamism—more than just being the court admiral. Mo Cheeks executed the non-coaching leadership dimensions of his job that day. He rose to the occasion. He followed the three-step change model. He had a vision (to help Natalie), he had absolute confidence in that goal and in his ability to manage the situation, and he acted on it.

Mo Cheeks was the Coach of the Portland Trailblazers with an uppercase *C* and an uppercase *M* and *L*. The challenge is for lowercase managers and leaders to recognize, accept, and execute the leadership possibilities, per Lily Tomlin and Mother Teresa. Nothing dictated that only Mo Cheeks could act that day.

Cheeks also met Woodrow Wilson’s challenge. Mo Cheeks was not on the court that day “merely to make a living.” He allowed the spectators, players, coaches, and especially Natalie to “live more amply,” and he did not “impoverish himself.” In fact, Cheeks was demonstrative in celebrating his self-fulfillment. He allowed himself one luxurious moment of self-adulation, pumping his fist joyfully as he returned to his coaching station. “I was brought up the right way by my mother and my father,” Cheeks said. “We didn’t have the best life. But they instilled in us to treat people the right way. That’s all that is. It’s no secret. There’s no recipe to it. It’s just treating people correctly, and if you do it correctly, it’ll come back to you.”^{iv}

By doing the right thing, Mo Cheeks launched himself into the annals of humanitarian history. Of the top six Google[®] Mo Cheeks entries, four pertain to that moment. The first is a biographical Wikipedia[®] entry, which mentions the event, and

the third one reviews his pro basketball statistics. The fourth entry, worth reading, is Randy Leonard's heartfelt description of the event. Leonard pays tribute: "Mo Cheeks, in a moment that epitomizes grace, presence of mind, kindness, and chivalry rescued one of these multi-conflicted, 13-year-old girls from potentially one of the most humiliating experiences of her young life."^v

Bindu Sridhar presents a useful and perceptive definition of a "responsive leader." He writes, "A responsive leader is a person who is able to identify both the explicit and implicit needs of people . . . and uses his understanding of those needs to try and fulfill them, whenever required."^{vi} First, Sridhar recognizes "explicit" needs—the ones colleagues express: requests, suggestions, or desires. But Sridhar acknowledges that some needs are "implicit," not expressed. Natalie Gilbert's need was implicit. The complete leader has an acute awareness of both sets of needs and responds to both appropriately.

The complete leader is also acutely aware of the dynamics of the situation and the recipient's feelings. In this sense, the art of "responding" overlaps the art of "helping." In Edgar Schein's book *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*, he recommends that responders (Schein uses the word "helpers") "enter the dynamic in a supportive, giving, ego-enhancing way."^{vii} All of Mo Cheeks' verbal and nonverbal cues and actions were just that, avoiding the emergence of feelings of belittlement, embarrassment, or lack of ability on Natalie's part. She was drowning, and Cheeks responded in a manner that preserved her esteem. The final warm, accepting, and complete hug "sealed the deal."

A dictionary definition of *responsiveness* is "responding with emotion to people and events." The phrase, "responding with emotion," erases the sense of obligatory duty and instead imparts energy, joy, and sincerity that transform the science of leadership into an art form—one that inspires, empowers, and unites. Mo Cheeks did all. He was completely wrapped into the moment—its needs and opportunities. Every one of his movements—his facial expressions, his eye movements, his hand gestures—epitomized a man completely involved in his mission.

Responding instantaneously to either implicit or explicit needs may not always be critical. In some situations, "Getting back to you next week" will suffice, as will placing an unrequested water cooler in a work area several weeks after recognizing a need. However, in other situations, fractions of seconds may differentiate between success and failure. Lifeguards and firefighters know that. Recognizing the frequent importance of reaction time, a dictionary's second definition of *responsive* is "quick to react or respond appropriately." Mo Cheeks did not have the luxury of pondering. His "propensity to act" instantly converted into acting. Thomas Jefferson shouts, "Act! Action will delineate and define you."^{viii} As we have seen, action delineated and defined Mo Cheeks.

YouTube[®] appropriately entitles the Natalie Gilbert/Mo Cheeks video, *Leadership and Attitude at the Right Time*.

Some Final Thoughts

A precursor to responsiveness is awareness. Unless one is responding to an expressed need, one must first be aware of a disparity between what is and what could be. The sense of disparity provokes a sense of discontent and then opportunity. According to Cherie Carter-Scott, "Paying attention to your feelings is the easiest way to get in touch with your inner machinations. Feelings are the lights on the dashboard of life; when one is illuminated, you can be sure it is a signal of some . . . issue that needs to be addressed."^{ix}

The feelings create the need to form a view of what could be—the future, the vision. After the vision is formed, confidence propels the propensity to act. If one is unaware, or if the awareness doesn't provoke feelings, then the cascade stops. One is robbed of the difficulties, agonies, challenges, and ultimately, the pleasures, growth, and rewards, even the ecstasy of the accomplishment or the victory. The passengers of United 93 on 9/11 are heralded as heroes because of their awareness, their astuteness, and their courage in devising and executing a plan to avoid a likely but unconfirmed disaster. They knew they were sacrificing their lives, only suspecting that their efforts would save countless others.

The sibling of responsiveness is decisiveness. Except in the circumstances that permit a time frame, responsiveness

mandates quick decisions. Mo Cheeks made such decisions: when to enter, how to stand, when to smile, when to touch, when to exit, when to self-adulate. Decisiveness strikes at the heart of what followers want from their leaders, often comprising strength, courage, intelligence, spirit—all in the name of making meaningful change for the good of the “order,” whether the order be the family, the club, the team, the department, the company, the teenager, or the nation. Political commentator James Carville admonished President Obama’s indecisiveness regarding the oil-spill cleanup. “This president needs to tell BP, ‘I’m in charge. You’re going to do what we say.’”^x

An appreciation of the value of leadership qualities can be achieved not only by studying cases like Clinton’s, Lincoln’s, and Cheeks,’ which represent the finest exhibitions, but also by studying cases that exemplify leadership voids. One can illustrate the positive by revealing the negative. In the decade of the 2000s, both presidents of the United States, as the leaders ultimately responsible for federal government mobilization and effectiveness, were slow to respond to major domestic crises and were justifiably criticized. George W. Bush’s inability to recognize the extent of the Katrina disaster and to rally the rescue operations caused immeasurable economic harm and human suffering—a blunder that Barack Obama inexcusably repeated after the BP oil spill but to a lesser extent.^{xi, xii, xiii} Although a lack of leadership is often viewed as an endorsement of the status quo and merely a missed opportunity for positive change, leadership vacuums can create damage.

Revisiting Patrick Lencioni, responsiveness combats two of the three signs of a miserable job.^{xiv} If my boss or colleague recognizes my need, either expressed or not, I am neither anonymous nor irrelevant.

Epilogue

Some say that at its core, leadership is about vision. Others claim it’s about personality and charisma, influence and persuasion, relationships and friendships, equity and service, or truth and integrity. I make an argument for change.

Regardless of the core composition, leadership is about all of those things and more. Many elements are connected, intertwined, or are inseparable. They can be circular; a cause that produces an effect can result in the effect promoting the cause. For example, relationships can lead to successful change, and the resulting achievement can cement relationships. Also, as Thomas Carlyle claims, “Nothing builds self-esteem and self-confidence like accomplishment,”^{xv} and self-esteem and self-confidence fuel accomplishment.

Regarding the number and selection of elements composing employee-centered leadership (connection, gratitude, responsiveness), there is value in simplicity. In the movie *Bull Durham*, Kevin Costner plays an over-the-hill, minor league catcher and mentor, Crash Davis. Davis tells rookie Calvin LaLoosh, played by Tim Robbins, “This is a very simple game. You throw the ball, you catch the ball, you hit the ball.”^{xvi} Well, we know that baseball is not a simple game; it’s excruciatingly complex. But executing those three acts well has solitary value and provides a basis for building knowledge and skills.

If the proposed approach to employee-centered leadership can stand alone, has integrity and truth, and provides a foundation to build upon, it has value. As a leader, drive meaningful change. Recognize that meaningful change is more likely accomplished with involved, enthusiastic, and empowered employees. Believe that connecting with employees, appreciating them, and responding to their explicit and implicit needs promotes those desired qualities.

Tonya, the boss and chair of the regular Monday morning staff meeting, met Warren, a fellow staff member, at the coffee bar before the meeting. She made deep eye contact with him and smiled. “Warren, good morning. How are you? May I get you a cup—cream, no sugar, I believe? I see your Steelers crushed my Ravens yesterday.” And off they went to the meeting. On their way down the hall, she said, “Warren, thanks for getting the report to me on Friday. Good job. I made only two changes.”

Notes

- ⁱ *Wikipedia*, “Mo Cheeks,”
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Cheeks.
- ⁱⁱ Robert J. Elisberg, “Oh, Say Can You Sing? A National Anthem to Remember.” *Huffington Post* (April 27, 2009).
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-j-elisberg/happy-maurice-cheeks-day_b_854304.html.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *FunTimesGuide*. “Ohhh, Say Can You SING?”
http://thefuntimeguide.com/2004/10/ohhh_say_can_you.php.
- ^{iv} D. Mayberry, “Star-Spangled Save: What Maurice Cheeks Did for Anthem Singer in Portland Is Still Remembered.” In *NewsOK*. <http://newsok.com/star-spangled-save-what-marice-cheeks-did-for-anthem-singer-in-portland-is-still-remembered/article/3413717>.
- ^v R. Leonard, “Mo Cheeks and Natalie Gilbert,” *Blue Oregon* (March 3, 2005).
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- ^{vi} B. Sridhar, “Leadership by Responsiveness,” *The Hindu* (June 30, 2004).
- ^{vii} Edgar H. Schein, *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2011).
- ^{viii} Thomas Jefferson, *Brainy Quotes*, “Action Quotes,”
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/action.html>.
- ^{ix} Cherie Carter-Scott, *If Life Is a Game, These Are the Rules: Ten Rules for Being Human as Introduced in Chicken Soup for the Soul* (New York: MJF Books, 1998).
- ^x James Carville, “Perspectives.” *Newsweek* (June 7, 2010): 16.
- ^{xi} *Foreign Mail Service*, “Obama Too Slow to Act Against Oil Slick Disaster, Threatening Species Along the Coast.”
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1270151/Obama-slow-act-oil-slick-disaster.html#ixzz1iLMZifgm>.
- ^{xii} *Wikipedia*, “Criticism of government response to Hurricane Katrina,”
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- ^{xiii} Ali Frick, “Bush On Katrina: ‘Don’t Tell Me The Federal Response Was Slow,’” *ThinkProgress.org* (2009 Jan 12).
<http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2009/01/12/34684/bush-defends-katrina-response/>.
- ^{xiv} Patrick Lencioni, *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job: A Fable for Managers (and Their Employees)* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

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- ^{xv} Thomas Carlyle in John C. Maxwell, *The 5 Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential* (New York: Center Street, 2011).
- ^{xvi} *Bull Durham*, Orion Pictures, 1988.