

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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CHAPTER 10

MANAGE SELF

Know the Story Others Tell About You

Don't you wish you could be in the room when the cast members from "The Bachelor," "Survivor" or "The Real Housewives" watch the final produced version of their reality shows? It must be fascinating as they watch how they are portrayed. During the reunion shows — when cast members come back to reflect on the experience — they say such things as, "Well, that's just how the show portrayed me. It didn't show you this and that."

(Authors' note: It is our deepest hope that if you are reading this book 15 years after publication you don't have the foggiest idea about these so-called reality shows. We'd take that as a sign our society is heading in a good direction.)

In reality, we are all a lot like those cast members. We have one version of how we see ourselves, but that isn't necessarily the story our co-workers would tell. It's as if we all are starring in our own movie about ourselves. We write and view the movie in our head and, at the end, we give the main character — ourselves — a standing ovation. Now imagine you're just a character in someone else's show. He or she is the main actor, and you simply play a supporting role. Are you the villain or a member of the team? Too aloof? Too happy-go-lucky? A key ally? Dependable? Dispensable?

You'll lead more successfully if you can imagine the stories others tell about you.



HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE WHO HAVEN'T YET MASTERED THAT SKILL:

- ▶ A politician thinks he can relate to everyone on the political spectrum — that he is a bridge builder. But others view him skeptically as coming from an extreme point of view.
- ▶ A newly hired CEO thinks she is there to turn around the company based on her past success turning around other companies. But employees view her as a hatchet-wielding menace preparing to slash jobs.
- ▶ A teacher thinks of himself as a great educator. His students get top marks. The school district and his alma mater have recognized his teaching excellence. Rather than seeing him as a gifted teacher, some colleagues see him as a ladder climber who cares more about his resume than collaborating with other teachers.

From a leadership perspective, it's easy to see why knowing what others are saying and thinking is important. The politician, knowing not everyone sees him as a bridge builder, might work harder to engage divergent factions. The new CEO might engage her employees around their needs and desires, rather than assume they want a turnaround specialist. The teacher might focus more on learning from others in his building and nominate others for teaching awards.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT KNOWING THE STORY OTHERS TELL ABOUT YOU?

Simply watch a few episodes of the show “The Office.” You’ll learn a lot about what this idea does not look like by watching the main character, Michael Scott. And remember, if you can’t identify the Michael Scott in your office, then you are the Michael Scott!

Knowing how others perceive you – or being able to imagine how they might perceive you – helps you be more effective. You can better adapt to the situation and experiment more wisely.

So what do you do with these stories once you know them?

One thing is for sure. We are not saying you should go out and change everything about yourself. After all, this concept is called “know the story others tell about you” not “know the story others tell about you and change.” By better knowing the stories others tell about you, you can better manage yourself and be more effective at exercising leadership.

So what happens if you hear something that resonates with you? For example, maybe you realize you’re not articulate when speaking in front of groups. You clam up and start talking in circles, leaving everyone in the room thinking you’re not only unprepared but incompetent. You can enhance these skills. You can join Toastmasters or take a public speaking class. In this case, it makes sense that once you know the story, you can take steps to rewrite it.

For a contrary example, let’s say you hear that you expect too much and come across as competitive. Your colleagues feel like you are trying to be better than them. Deep down you know you’re really passionate about the work and want to be part of something successful. In this case, you aren’t willing to compromise in hopes that others will like you more. However, you might decide you need to do a better job communicating with colleagues about your passion and how much you care about them and what they bring to the table.

HOW DO YOU LEARN THE STORIES OTHERS TELL ABOUT YOU?

- ▶ **DIRECT FEEDBACK ABOUT SPECIFIC SITUATIONS.** Ask, “What could I do better in this situation? What’s my part of this mess? If you could change one thing about me related to this situation, what would it be?”
- ▶ **WATCH FOR INDIRECT FEEDBACK.** Pay attention to body language and the song beneath their words. What are they not saying?
- ▶ **USE YOUR IMAGINATION.** Think of multiple ways someone could view you in the situation.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN SEEKING FEEDBACK

- ▶ **GROUND YOUR INQUIRY IN A SITUATION.** (“Sam, at the meeting on Thursday, how do you think I was perceived?”)
- ▶ **EMBED IN YOUR QUESTIONS THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT THAT YOU ARE IMPERFECT.** (“I know I have lots of room for improvement. Maybe you can help. What I’m wondering is ...”)
- ▶ **GIVE THEM PERMISSION TO BE FRANK WITH YOU.** (“I would really like your honest feedback ...”)
- ▶ **COMMUNICATE YOUR PURPOSE.** (“This is important to me, because I’m trying to help move us forward on _____ and knowing how I’m perceived will help me.”)

*The same way that you are
the main character of your story,
you are only a secondary character
in everybody else’s story.*

— MIGUEL ANGEL RUIZ



I have been retired for three years. I served as the executive director of a well-known not-for-profit for 15 years. After spending some time away, I was asked to come back as a volunteer. I'm still passionate about the cause and have jumped back in to help. Some are welcoming me with open arms but others don't seem as friendly as they were before. Any advice?

- ELLIE THE EX-E.D.

Dear Ellie,

Here are just a few of the stories that could be swirling around in people's minds: You don't trust the new executive director. You aren't really passionate about the cause; you just can't stand retirement. The new executive director is struggling, and the board must have encouraged you to help.

Yours is a delicate situation. Ask others how you are perceived. (See the tips earlier in this section.) Don't ignore the unfriendly behavior. Assume that something is up, and try to get to the bottom of it.

Hang in there and let your passion for the not-for-profit's cause fuel you as you work through these difficulties.

Onward!