

The Quiet Leader

Is brash, outspoken behavior necessary to get to the top? Executive coach Terry Del Percio says no.



We have been conditioned to think of leadership in terms of bold, aggressive, charismatic, even rebellious behavior. Let's face it—in American culture, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The dramatic leader gets the attention. The brash leader gets her or his face on the cover of business magazines and national newspapers.

But consider Kouzes and Posner's book, *The Leadership Challenge* (Jossey-Bass, 1996). In it they define leadership as the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. Does one really need to be bold, aggressive, and visionary to meet these criteria?

In the July 24 issue of *Fortune*, writer Betsy Morris looks at a new type of leader. Her article, "Welch's Rules for Winning Don't Work Anymore," talks mainly about the change in the "old" rules of creating shareholder value and controlling marketshare. But woven into her list of seven new rules for success in corporate America is a significant shift in what leadership means.

According to Morris, the celebrity CEO of the 1980s and '90s needed a spotlight, while today's CEO needs internal fortitude and courage. It seems the drive to be a superstar has been replaced with the capacity to stand up for what one believes and stay the course over the long term. (Maybe we could add the courage to do the right thing.)

For example, Jack Welch popularized the notion that employees should be ranked as A, B, or C players, with the bottom group relentlessly removed. "Get the lower ranked people out early," he was fond of saying.

Morris said the new rule of hiring is to find passionate people. Steve Jobs is perhaps the best example of this: he only hires people who live and breathe technology. People come to work and perform because they have a sense of purpose and meaning in the work they do.

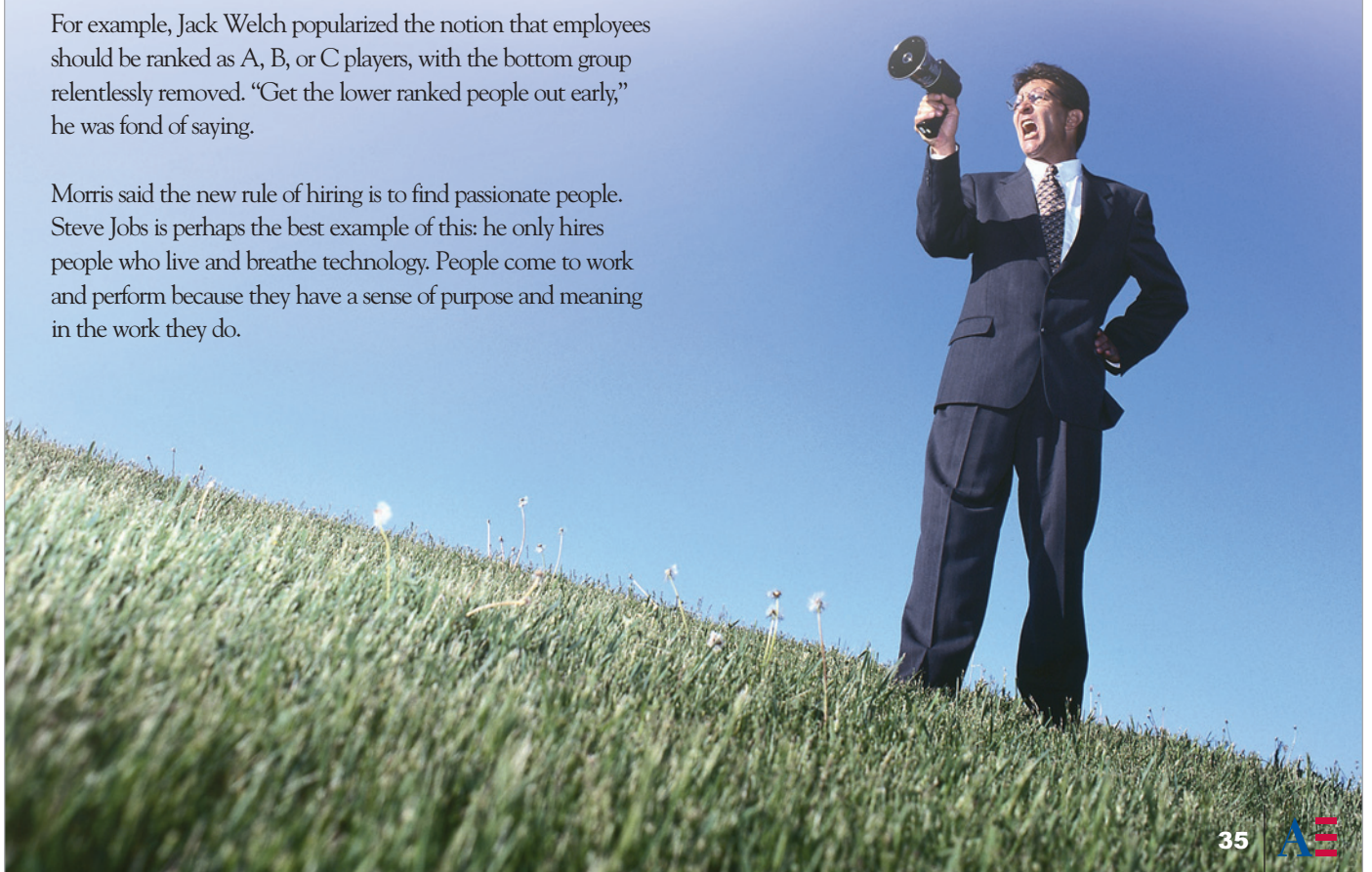
Everyday leaders

Joseph Badaracco, Jr., author of *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing* (HBS Press, February 2002), agrees, saying we spend too much time on stories of heroic leaders and providing interesting insights into what he calls everyday leaders.

Badaracco believes heroic leaders model important behaviors, such as courage and high ideals, but says our preoccupation with front-page heroes takes our attention away from the majority of people who solve problems and model leadership behavior every day. They tend to work quietly behind the scenes, making decisions based on their values.

Most people, most of the time, aren't acting like heroes or making earth-shattering decisions, Badaracco says. They are taking care of the day-to-day activities that help their families and their organizations survive and thrive. Badaracco writes that quiet leaders know how to apply four basic principles as they lead others. They know how to:

Put things off until tomorrow. During ethical dilemmas, quiet leaders often buy time to let things calm down and think through the situation. They get other peoples' perspectives, an important strategic tactic.



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Pick their battles. Quiet leaders seem to be cognizant of the crucial nature of political capital. They have good timing—they know when to put a stake in the ground and when to go out on a limb to get what their teams need.

Bend the rules without breaking them. The world isn't black and white; it's mostly gray. There are many times when boundaries need to be stretched to maintain a sense of integrity. Quiet leaders find a way to do the right thing and still play according to the rules.

Find a compromise. Quiet leaders know that none of us can get 100% of what we need all the time. The solution is often in the middle, and everyone moves on.

Shut up and listen

It's difficult to pin down an exact definition of a quiet leader, but David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work* (Collins, 2006), characterizes them this way: They are masters at bringing out the best performance in others. They improve their employees' thinking, literally changing the way their brains process information without telling anyone what to do.

Given that the vast majority of people in today's companies are being paid to think rather than perform rote activities, improving thinking might be one of the fastest ways to improve performance.

Michele Vitti, founder of Arlington, Mass.-based Sunata Consulting, thinks along

the same lines. "Real leadership is about getting very quiet and listening to ourselves and others in ways we have never done before," she said.

"As leaders, we cannot simply take the past and replicate it—everything is different about the world and about business. Leaders must forge new ideas and learn how to sense what's coming. Quiet leadership is found in those who are self-aware, in those women and men who know themselves and take time to know others in order to move toward a common goal. Leadership is not a solitary process; it's a group function."

Both high-profile and quiet leaders are important. We know the high-profile leaders; we see them on the news and on the covers of magazines. Then there are the quiet leaders, often leading behind the scenes. We don't read about them in *The Wall Street Journal*, and the idea that they are quiet leads us to believe they are hard to spot.

But every day there are individuals in every organization quietly mobilizing people to achieve common goals. They are all brilliant in their own way. And yes, even among the ranks of people at the top, there exists a cadre of leaders who are ethical, courageous, compassionate—and quiet. ■

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