



Friends-of-the-Firm Mini-Briefing

Illusion-Based Leadership

What Have We Done to Ourselves?

By

Alan Dunn, President, GDI Consulting & Training Company, 2005



In 1923, a singular technological invention by Vladimir Kosma Zworykin, a Russian scientist, forever changed the face of society. This same invention may have contributed to significant changes in the execution of industrial leadership principles. This world impacting invention was the Iconoscope... the predecessor to the modern television. While much has been written about the impact of television on modern society, little has been presented relating to its impact on our perception of leadership. But all that changes here!

In his award-winning book, *“The Post Corporate World,”* David Korten defines the term “values” more succinctly than any business or sociological theoretician has ever defined the term. Dr. Korten suggests that our **values are shaped by the images around us**. If one looks around society, one can easily conclude that this insightful bit of wisdom can only be true. Television was at the cutting edge of promoting women in business in the 1950’s and early 1960’s. At about that time, the glass walls and ceilings began shattering in executive suites across North America. If one observes the timing of this societal change, one will clearly see that images of females in the workforce were first promoted by liberal thinkers in the media.

But the “*imagineering*” of society norms is not always good as in the previous example. Virtually every popular television serial today normalizes premarital sexual behavior, and many shows have likewise normalized violence. It is clear from the numerous studies done by psychology departments in universities across North America that our youth have become desensitized to violence and to the implications of premarital promiscuity. In fact, the conventional notion of the family has all but been imagineered away by the media... and subsequently by various legislative bodies across our country. The new media-promoted image of the family is far different than the image promoted 30 years ago!

What does this have to do with business leadership?

At its heart, leadership is about getting people to work as a team and enjoy a sense of communal accomplishment. Leadership is not a technical, nor is it an abstract subject. It is a label for behavior that focuses on moving people in a common direction. Leadership is not always kind. It is not always gentle, and it certainly is not always fun. But leadership always results in a sense of accomplishment that provides benefits beyond the leader. Leadership is supposed to provide a sense of accomplishment to the group. Leadership is supposed to foster ambition, not mute it.

Television (and now the internet) has ultimately driven the media business to the masses. It has taken the art of creating images into the science of imagineering. **By bombarding us with constant images of a society that may not exist, we begin to believe it does exist.** All the books on leadership may have done fundamentally the same thing. You cannot go into a business bookstore or an airport magazine stand without seeing the new leadership book-of-the-week. We now have transcendental meditation for leaders. We have seven habits that we all need to follow. We have to learn new talents for corralling chaos, reigning-in ambiguity and transforming our organizations. **But what all these books have missed is the principle that leadership must result in accomplishments which the group and the extended group (AKA shareholders, suppliers, the community, etc.) can celebrate.**

The North American economy has been built on the strength of capitalism, free market enterprise and the ability of anyone to be an entrepreneur. **At no time in our history have we needed leadership more than we need it now. To do this, we will need to stop over-intellectualizing the act of leadership and start focusing on the practicality of moving people in a desirable and common direction.** We must stop paying attention to the pseudo-intellectual culture babblers who have never made payroll or participated in a successful group accomplishment. We must start paying attention to a few basic principles of leadership... and master them. We must consciously ask ourselves when confronted with leadership issues, not *“what is the image-maker's perspective of leadership”*, but *“what is our personal perspective of leadership?”* It is time we stop allowing those who don't know how to lead to invent the image of leadership... which often becomes the mis-reality of leadership.

In case you think this is a nutty commentary, I would strongly urge you to observe every highly successful organization. You will discover a leader at the top of the organization who does not necessarily subscribe to what is written in today's popular leadership books. You will undoubtedly observe a greater emphasis on the *process* of leadership than on the leader.

General Electric is a great company because it has always had great leaders (arguably with a singular exception) and great *practical* depth to its leadership process. Rubbermaid introduces more new products faster than any company in the world because groups of people make it happen. The Marine Corps is the most awesome fighting force in the world because it focuses on team accomplishment over the glory of leaders. Southwest Airlines and Virgin Atlantic are led by individuals the rest of the industry think are strange, but not coincidentally, lead organizations with great team spirit, great group senses of accomplishment and some of the best financial returns in the industry.

It is paradoxical that those who star in medical movies and television sitcoms know nothing about the technical practice of medicine, yet they shape many of our perspectives relating to medicine, including our beliefs surrounding managed health care. Isn't it interesting that the fluff of society, those who *“pretend”* rather than do, are the ones who shape many of our images

relating to family, business, environment, and politics? It certainly is fascinating that societal values are being created by those who are least likely to find themselves in the situation requiring the gut-wrenching need and execution of those values!

Don't let this happen to your leadership organization. Remember that leadership does not come from a book or a movie. It comes from a deep personal constitution and absolute knowledge that leadership must result in tangible accomplishment for the group. Period.

About the Author



Alan G. Dunn is currently President of GDI Consulting & Training Company and founder of the Manufacturing Executive Institute (MEI). He is also the creator and lead-instructor of the 18-month Next Generation Global Supply Chain Leadership Development Program at the California Institute of Technology's (Caltech) Center for Technology & Management Education (CTME), where he has taught since 1984. Mr. Dunn also serves on the University of California at Riverside's (UCR) Advisory Board for Transformative Leadership in Disruptive Times.

Mr. Dunn specializes in supply chain management, strategic planning, manufacturing management, operations management, leadership development, cost management and business finance.

Previously, Mr. Dunn was a Vice President at Gemini Management Consulting and a Partner at Coopers & Lybrand. In both positions, he led large technical manufacturing teams through innovative productivity enhancement projects. Mr. Dunn has participated in >188 significant manufacturing and distribution projects inside >118 companies. He has worked in 24 countries and across most manufacturing sectors.

Over his 40-year career in global supply chain consulting, Mr. Dunn has served on the Boards of Directors of numerous public, private and non-profit companies. He is the recipient of the National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) prestigious "*Director of the Year*" award in 2007.

Alan is a career Association of Supply Chain Management (ASCM) volunteer, having served as the President of the Orange County Chapter in 1984 and Chairman of ASCM in 2015. He was inducted into the "*ASCM New England Supply Chain Conference Hall of Fame*" in 2022.

Mr. Dunn has a degree in business management from California State University, Fullerton.

Contact Information

Alan Dunn, President
GDI Consulting & Training Company
P.O. Box 205
Temecula, California 92593 USA
951-587-2003
agdunn@gdiconsult.com
www.gdiconsult.com