

## Zen and the Art of Leadership

*Stephen R Balzac*

In the movie, "First Knight," Richard Gere's Lancelot explains to a young man the secrets of becoming a master swordsman: study your opponent, know how to recognize the moment of victory or defeat and wait for it, and not care whether you live or die. At the last, the young man stares at Lancelot in shock. In the modern sport of fencing, a master fencer will say almost the same thing: the secret to winning is to learn how, and when, to not care.

This is doubtless counter-intuitive: the key to living is to not care if you live or die? The key to winning is to not care if you win or lose? Paradoxically, when an athlete cares too deeply about the outcome, they start to judge each action. Under the pressure of combat or competition, that constant judgment can lead to doubt or fear of failure. Doubt or fear lead to mistakes which lead to defeat. Only by developing his skill and confidence to the point that he believes the outcome is not in doubt can the swordsman successfully not care. However, the swordsman who never doubts himself will never develop that level of skill: the doubt and questioning is essential to learning the limits of his skill. When preparing, the swordsman must care deeply and passionately; once swords are drawn, it is time to not care. Ready or not, the best

chance the swordsman has of living is to trust so deeply in his own skill that he can act without caring. He must have the patience to create the moment of victory, recognize it when it comes, and then strike without fear or hesitation.

***"... if you don't want to have to care about whether people are going where you want them, make sure they know where to go and will trample anyone who gets in their way."***

Oddly enough, a business or team leader is in the same position as the master swordsman: the leader who cares too much chokes his team; the leader who cares too little does not prepare. Leaders micromanage exactly because they are too concerned about the outcome, and believe that attempting to control every little action will increase the odds of success. That approach doesn't work in sports and it doesn't work in business.

Like the swordsman, to maximize his chances of success, the leader must learn how, and when, to not care whether they succeed or fail. This is no easy task. Teams regularly suffer from leaders who allow the fear of failure to guide

their actions and who, therefore, never allow the team to operate at its highest levels. Recently, I heard a leader state that he would not provide his team with clear guidelines for a project, preferring that they check with him at each step, "to avoid problems." He couldn't understand why they were so "unmotivated." In fact, they were highly motivated: motivated to avoid the constant stream of criticism they received. And the leader? His primary motivation appeared to be fear of losing status if things weren't perfect. Ironically, he was busily creating the very result he was most afraid of.

Unlike a swordfight, however, the team's project is not over within minutes. Instead, a project can last weeks, months, or even years. It is neither possible, nor feasible, for a leader to not care about the team's progress during that entire period. Instead, the leader must learn to constantly shift from caring to not caring: she must understand her team, know how they work, and understand which role to take to best enable the team to operate at peak performance. As MIT's Ed Schein observes in his book, *Helping*, the best leaders are those who can articulate clear goals and who recognize that they cannot achieve those goals on their own. They need the help of their team; conversely, they also need to be

able to help their team help them. Leaders who care too much at the wrong times frequently find accepting help or realizing that they need to act as helpers to others difficult or impossible.

So how does a leader learn to not care? Here are some tips:

***Clearly define the team's objectives and communicate those objectives as vividly as you can.***

Make sure everyone knows what victory looks like. Get people excited. Put another way, if you don't want to have to care about whether people are going where you want them, make sure they know where to go and will trample anyone who gets in their way.

***Provide people with the information they need to evaluate their own progress.***

Get out of the loop. You don't want to be the navigator. You want to help them learn to read the terrain.

***Encourage constructive argument.***

No conflict is as bad as too much conflict. Team members must be able to question and disagree with one another or work quality suffers. If you end up spending all your time mediating conflict or trying to get people to talk, you'll be exhausted and unable to trust your team.

***Understand what victory and defeat look like, and how you'll know if you're in danger.***

Don't wait for something to go wrong before you know if

something is going wrong. Identify the warning signs early.

***Make providing feedback and progress reports to you as easy and unobtrusive as possible.***

Minimize things that interrupt people's daily routines. People work best when they can predict their schedules and are not being interrupted. Therefore, it's well worth the effort to develop ways of keeping you informed that the team members don't see as a burden. Taking people out to lunch is a fine method of encouraging open communication without it feeling intrusive.

***Work with the team to establish regular checkpoints or milestones that will enable you to detect problems early.***

Build in room for errors or unexpected problems. Don't worry if you don't know what's going on every minute or even every day. Remember, you care most about the trend, not every bump and wriggle along the way. Never forget Murphy's Law: if something can go wrong, it will. Planning slush time for the unexpected can keep minor problems from becoming major disasters. It's the little things that are handled in a rush that often become the biggest disasters later on.

***Analyze, evaluate, and adjust, not judge and punish.***

Understand why a milestone wasn't met and adjust resources accordingly. If people are afraid

to make mistakes, they won't be creative. Remember, the key goal of the leader is to enable the team. That means finding ways to help them accomplish their goals, not punishing them when something goes wrong. No one comes to work wanting to do a bad job.

***Revise the vision as you progress and more details come into focus.***

Events will force changes, more information will alter your perspectives or priorities. Don't fight it. Go with the flow and be willing to adjust your vision to take advantage of the opportunities that arise.

***Give up power.***

As your team matures, they'll want to do more. Delegate whatever you can. If you've prepared correctly, the more you demonstrate trust, the more they will live up to it. Don't worry about becoming useless. Paradoxically, the more you give up the more important you become.

Build your team. Make them worthy of your trust and you worthy of theirs. Know what victory and defeat look like. Turn the team loose. Don't care if you succeed or fail.

The results just may surprise you.

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