



## **Rules for Leading: Break Them at Your Own Risk** by David Garic

In a desperate championship game, a football coach calls a play--a special play – that he knows will work. The ball is snapped, the quarterback drops back to pass and throws to a running back that catches the ball while he is behind the line of scrimmage. The running back stops, sets, and throws a completed pass thirty yards downfield to a wide receiver. The play yields a big gain and puts the team in scoring position, threatening its opponent. Wait! The officials are huddled in the middle of the field and then a yellow penalty flag ascends into the air, landing near the spot where they are conferencing. The conference breaks and we hear the verdict: *Illegal forward pass*. The previous play is voided and the team is penalized for the infraction. Surely the coach must have known that this type of play was against the rules. Or did he?

If this very same play had been run a year ago, in 2005, it would have been perfectly legal and within the rules, but an off-season rule change made this play illegal. Yet, the coach was unaware of it. He didn't know the rules. It proved to be a costly mistake since his team would eventually lose the game and would never score another touchdown, losing by a last second field goal.

When it comes to leading people, teams, and organizations there aren't any referees present to make sure we follow the rules. Over and over again, leaders call the wrong plays without even knowing they're breaking the rules. All leaders are different, and all leaders *lead* differently.

Fortunately for us, there aren't very many rules for leading, at least when it comes to determining whether or not a leader is ultimately successful. Most attempts by companies and organizations to communicate to leaders their expectations are mostly variations on a theme: attempts to amplify the rules. But, every so often these attempts go awry, resulting in leadership failure and

frustration. What has happened is that the rules (unknowingly) have been broken.

So, just what are these rules and why are they so important?

### **Rule # 1: Leaders Cannot Motivate People**

Let me illustrate with a couple of simple (and possibly absurd) examples. Assume for this example that I am your supervisor. You are sitting at your desk. On your desk sits a bottle of water. I want you to move the bottle of water from your desk and place it on the table behind you. I say to you, "If you move that bottle of water from your desk to the table, I'll reward you with five dollars." Would you move it? Most people would move the water. Now that you've moved the water to the table, I want you to move it back to your desk. I say, "If you don't move the water from the table to the desk, I'm going to fire you." Would you move it? Again, most people would move it.

Referring to the above scenario, answer this question:

Who's *REALLY* motivated in this situation, you or me? Initially you may answer that you were motivated, and quite possibly you were motivated. Now, answer this question:

Who's *REALLY* motivated to move the bottle of water in this situation, you or me? Most of us would answer that I was motivated, not you. You see, you only moved the bottle of water because: a. you wanted the five dollars, or b. you wanted to keep your job. It wasn't because you *WANTED* to move the bottle of water.

Leaders repeatedly fool themselves into thinking they can motivate people by offering them some form of tangible reward or by instilling fear in them. In both cases they are wrong. Let's take the same scenario above and play it out a bit differently.

Suppose I said this to you: "It's important that you move the bottle of water on your desk to the table because you or someone else may knock it over, spilling water on your computer. If that happens it will not only create a mess, it will slow us all down because we'll probably have to help you. Also, we'll probably have to get our IT people to come and repair a short-circuited computer."

Would you be more inclined to *WANT* to move the bottle of water? Most of us would say yes.

The bottle of water example is slightly ridiculous but it illustrates the rule: Leaders Cannot Motivate People. What leaders *can* do, however, is *be motivational*. Before accusing me of playing fast and loose with semantics, please consider this: All of us are self-motivated. We all do what we do because we, for a multitude of reasons, are *motivated* to do it. You see, the key for

leaders when it comes to motivation is not believing that they can motivate people, it's that they understand what motivates people, what drives them, and create the opportunities for them to satisfy those motivations.

## **Rule # 2. Check Your Ego at the Door.**

The Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy, returning to the academy grounds after a New Year's dinner with friends in Annapolis, Maryland, is embarrassed in front of friends because the Marine sentry on duty at the security checkpoint doesn't immediately recognize him. When asked to produce some form of identification, he gives the Marine his military ID, then grabs the Marine's arm and says, "Look, Marine. Look, Marine."

The Marine backs into a defensive stance, puts one hand on his pepper spray canister, the other on his handcuffs, and orders the still unrecognized admiral to step back. He then calls for the sergeant of the guard, and subsequently looks at the ID card. His immediate thought is *Wow, I'm in big trouble.*

The incident is resolved, the admiral is permitted entry, and it is likely that would have been the end of the story if it weren't for an anonymous complaint submitted to the Navy Inspector General. The complaint detailed the admiral's encounter with the Marine as well as reports alleging dozens of other incidents involving the admiral since his arrival the prior summer.

The Navy Inspector General launched an investigation shortly after receiving the complaint and the results of the investigation substantiated that the admiral had placed his hands on the Marine sentry, a violation of military law. But, it was much worse than that. It also substantiated numerous other incidents that included the admiral's threats to "kill" subordinates if they failed to comply with his orders. Other incidents were detailed in the investigation that indicated he had mistreated subordinates, embarrassed them publicly, berated them, and created an atmosphere of fear amongst a large number of the faculty and staff at the academy.

Less than a full year into what is normally a five-year assignment (and the job of a lifetime) as superintendent, the admiral was forced to resign his position. Something had gone terribly wrong. How could this have happened?

Leaders whose focus is ego-centric take significant risk. Over and over again, leaders who behave as though their followers exist solely to serve them inevitably tumble from their exalted status. They fail to realize that in every circumstance, any influence that leaders enjoy is a direct result of the willingness of their followers to allow themselves to be influenced by leaders. If followers aren't willing to be led, the leaders are powerless. Followers can easily and readily detect when a leader's focus is on him and not them. Effective leaders

focus on the needs, wants, desires, and expectations of their followers and every action they take is intended to help followers satisfy those needs, wants and expectations.

### **Rule # 3. Do it Right.**

In the mid-1960s, a researcher named Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments, the results of which had a profound effect on our understanding of why even seemingly good people can behave in ways that can be defined in no term other than egregious. Seeking to understand obedience to authority, participants in the experiment were asked to administer a series of electrical shocks to a fellow experiment participant, known as the “learner”, when the learner failed to recall certain word pairs that had been dictated to him. As the learner continued to fail, the intensity of the shocks would be increased until a maximum of 450 volts was administered. In reality, the learner was a stooge of the experimenter and was not being shocked at all. However, participants believed they were in fact shocking another person.

The results were frightening. Contrary to what Milgram had predicted before beginning the experiments, 62% of the participants went all the way to 450 volts! They protested, expressed concern for the learner’s well-being, anguished, and resisted, but ultimately they went on. They obeyed the orders of the experimenter to administer the shocks.

Most of us would like to think we would have stopped far short of the 450 volt threshold and some of us may have refused to participate in any way but the results have been repeated in numerous studies. One of the most significant reasons participants gave for their willingness to continue on with administering the shocks was that a person in authority (the experimenter) was demanding that they continue.

Leaders have a moral responsibility to their followers to ensure that what they require of their followers is within ethical boundaries. Succinctly, they must create and maintain the ethical climate within which they operate. Simply by virtue of their authority and position in an organization, leaders can wield significant amounts of power. Misusing this power can produce horrendous and often deadly results. Leaders are expected to define what is right and what is wrong, and when they choose to ignore what is right and expect what is wrong they place their followers in harm’s way.

To do it right, leaders must:

1. Define a clear, understandable set of guidelines for their followers. Give examples of what is right and what is wrong.

2. Define and determine ahead of time what the rewards are for ethical behavior. Conversely, determine ahead of time the consequences for unethical behavior.
3. Monitor the level of stress and pressure followers are performing under. Determine what the optimal level of stress is and seek to prevent it from increasing.

You can choose to follow them, bend or break them, or ignore them. Whatever choice you make, the rules are the rules, and they are as real as Newton's law of gravity. Like Newton's law, the rules have a predictable effect on how successful or unsuccessful any leader will be. As long as people are in positions of responsibility, attempting to influence other people to achieve a goal, or to get the job done, the rules will be there.