



Kathy Van Tassell

# The Bankruptcy of Leadership

And how to get out of leadership debt.

Turn on the television. Take a look around your company. You may notice something interesting.

## Where have all the leaders gone?

Now, we aren't saying that you can't find a great leader somewhere. However, for the most part leadership is vacant. Let's be honest here, when you look at recent statistics from the Gallup Organization, which we trust implicitly, employees are actively disengaged to the tune of 70%, few know what's expected of them at work, and many choose to leave an organization shortly after arriving. Are they leaving the company? Probably not. What they are leaving, either physically and emotionally, are leaders who simply have not learned how to lead effectively. It's a crisis if seismic proportions, and we all see it and know it.

I was fortunate to season in a company early in my career where we were taught values-based leadership through learning, opportunity and mentoring. It was structured, individualized, strategic and supported. On my second stint with the same company after a 15-year hiatus, that leadership did not exist. In fact, what I experienced, and what people were (and still are) afraid to say publicly, was the most inept, unseasoned and compliant leaders in my lengthy career. Loyal to the brand, but with no courage, creativity, compass or consistency.

It begs a question—what happened?

Simply put, the company stopped investing in the intentional process of growing leaders and holding leaders accountable, most likely because this process required time, risk and resources—and the company stopped valuing the need for it. The insidious decline of leadership development has changed the complexion and culture of this well known company. True, there is loyalty to a powerful brand, but the essence and culture that once was so extraordinary, is now, just ordinary with mediocrity. Certainly not compelling and energized.

What can we learn from the past that is still a good business practice for today?

Here are three dynamics we believe can make a fundamental difference in your organization. It's time to rethink and reimagine working with your leaders.

## We believe that leaders are developed, not born.

### 1. Clearly define your leadership expectations and qualities.

In order to create a "culture by design", leaders must know what is expected of them and how those expectations and behaviors fit into the overall work. We like the term "leadership qualities" over competencies. We expect you to be competent in what you do. However, a "quality" by definition is *a degree of excellence in something*.

What are those leadership "qualities" you want and need for your culture? Keep in mind that leaders directly impact your business results. And it is a leader's job to create the right environment in which employees can feel motivated and supported, and to recognize and cultivate each person's unique strengths and talents.

You must intentionally and clearly define them.

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## 2. Invest in a formal leadership development curriculum that integrates with your expectations.

Sadly, you just don't swallow the red pill and then know everything you need to know about being a great leader. You learn how to be a great leader over time, through consistent development and a commitment to growth by both you and your organization. Leadership development is an "investment". The organization is developing an asset, which it hopes will yield a great return. Make no investment, and leaders are left to improvise, a dangerous place to be, which causes a ripple effect throughout the entire organization, in particular in the area of employee engagement. Remember, people leave leaders, not organizations.

The reason you clearly define leadership expectations and leadership qualities is so you can intentionally teach and develop them. It creates consistency in your culture through leadership.

## 3. Provide ongoing 360° feedback to leaders that will help them course correct and evolve.

You don't know what you don't know. And if you never receive any objective feedback, it will be difficult to shift behaviors and learn. Receiving 360° feedback is still a necessary way to help a leader increase self-awareness. It's like looking in a mirror and we all need that from time to time. This feedback can help you leverage strengths, uncover blindspots and allow you to focus on areas where you can improve. It fosters frequent and transparent communication. It is true that you have to ask the right questions and work to protect the integrity of the process. Without this feedback, leaders will not be able to effectively course correct and grow.

We are all looking for, craving really, values-based leaders who live with integrity, honesty, courage of convictions and consistency. We are looking for those leaders who inspire us, who develop us, and who build long-term relationships with us. We want leaders we can trust, whose actions are consistent with their words. **Simply put, we want leaders.**

The best investment you can make as an organization is to invest in the leaders who lead your employees who deliver your service. This act alone will increase your employee engagement.

Ask yourself if your organization is close to bankruptcy. What would change if you shifted your thinking and strategically invested in the leaders you entrust the work to and those who are paid to lead others?

It really is a simple solution. **You get what you pay for.**

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At **Onboard Oxygen Classroom**, we take leadership development seriously. Ask us about **The Service Leadership Series**, a completely integrated leadership development experience.

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