



## The Eyes of the Leader

By Dr. Michael O'Brien & Dr. Diane Menendez

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” In the past five years, we’ve seen this quote by Marcel Proust in many places. Earlier this year, it appeared as a poster in the training room where a group of high potential managers had gathered from around the world to focus on developing their leadership. Surrounded by pictures and quotes from role model leaders—Jack Welch, Indira Gandhi, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, John McCain—the young managers were daunted by the task of growing into the company’s future leaders. The message they heard was this: you need to work at your leadership. If you practice leadership, nurture leadership, you can learn to do it better.

“Where should I start?” Was the question many of them asked.

Many young managers first try to develop leadership by acquiring the trappings of leadership: the right degree, the right car, the right clothes, the manicured look. We think that’s the wrong approach. Leadership isn’t about what leaders have. It isn’t even fundamentally about what leaders do, though many books declare that’s what leadership is, taking action. Learning to lead requires working from the inside out—because a leader’s actions and the results they create grow out of the leader’s way of *being*. We believe the place to begin is with learning how to see and to think like a leader.

Twenty years ago, Michael learned how necessary it is to get beyond the trappings and to learn from the inside out when he got interested in photography. Naturally, he thought he needed to acquire the *stuff* of photography to begin. He looked at photographers and saw how much stuff they had—cameras, lenses, and vests with lots pockets. Michael didn’t have much money, so he was short on stuff. All he could afford was a single lens reflex Canon A1 workhorse camera, with a regular lens. But he was fortunate to have a girlfriend, Gloria, who worked as a visual artist and photographer. Gloria agreed to teach Michael about photography.

The first time they were going out to the woods, Gloria shocked Michael with her first instruction: “Just leave all your stuff here. You don’t need it yet.” Wait a minute, Michael thought. He wanted to be a photographer and had just bought some of the things photographers have. Gloria was insistent. So Michael left his camera behind. He went out into the woods to learn how to see the world the way a photographer sees it.

Gloria taught Michael the essence of how to be a photographer: to move through the world as a careful observer, noting the subtle distinctions and differences that many people don’t see at all. Michael learned to distinguish foreground vs. background. To notice gradations of shadows, the many subtle distinctions between dark and brilliant light. To see the gentle breezes on the bottom of the forest floor that are just barely moving the fern’s fronds, even though the leaves on

the trees remain still. To notice the edges of the fern as it brushes up against the side of the tree, the immense variation in the colors of green and the patterns even in a small patch of forest floor.

That was the first of a number of walks through the woods where Gloria taught Michael how to see as a photographer sees. Finally Gloria said, “It’s time to bring your camera. You’re going to insert your camera between your eye that now knows how to see and the world that you are seeing.” She taught him to start first with himself. Only when he had learned to focus himself, his own seeing— only then was it useful for him to apply the camera’s focus.

Over time Michael learned the camera’s buttons and dials, the basics of aperture openings and f-stops and kinds of film. But that was all secondary. What was primary was that learning to see the world as a photographer does is the essential aspect of learning to *be* a photographer.

Gloria’s lessons apply to leadership, too: if you want to lead well, focus on *being* first, *doing* second, and *having* the stuff last. This contrasts with how many of us think about leadership. That it’s essential to get the stuff that well known leaders have: an air of authority, status and position, good suits, the right haircut. Then we can go and do what leaders do, giving the right speech, saying the right thing, walking with the right air of authority.

The truth is, we believe, that leadership is a way of being, which grows out of a leadership mindset. To cultivate a leadership mindset requires learning how to see things in the people and circumstances around you that many don’t see. Like Michael’s learning in the forest, leaders must learn to observe as great leaders do, making observations and seeing subtle distinctions that are fundamentally different from how most people around them see corporate life.

Here are several “ways of seeing” that characterize the best leaders.

### **1. Leaders see the places where management won’t do, where authentic leadership is required.**

Successful leaders know that leadership is not just a *role*, it is a *relationship*. Out of this relationship we call leadership, people will do extraordinary things. Leaders influence through taking action in the places where inspiring, motivating and encouraging people is essential to achieving new or improved results.

Good leaders know that if people are already going to get someplace without leadership, then leadership isn’t needed. If you run a McDonald’s restaurant, where rigorous consistency, not change, is the order of the day, then good management will do just fine.

Leaders look for where their presence and actions are truly needed, when the group needs to move to someplace they are not likely to get to unless leadership is involved. John F. Kennedy saw such an opportunity when he called for a space program that would put a man on the moon within 10 years. Martin Luther King saw that his leadership was essential to keep the Civil Rights movement on a path of nonviolence.

If you want to learn leadership, look for the places where only leadership will serve the people and the organization. Don't waste your time where leadership isn't required.

## **2. Leaders look for accountability, not blame.**

No matter how skillful the leadership, the path to successful results inevitably includes setbacks and detours. Breakdowns occur. They are usually seen as indicators that something isn't working the way it should. The typical response to breakdown is to look for who's to blame, who's at fault—that is, who other than ourselves is at fault. Leaders walk into a breakdown and waste no time blaming other people. They know that the cost of blame is high. Blame sets up a ripple effect of negativity. It creates a climate of fear, where one's vision gets narrowed and choices seem limited.

Leaders don't get pulled into the trap of assigning blame. Instead, they look for accountability: First, they look for and discover something that will move the situation forward *through* the breakdown. Then, they claim accountability for enabling that movement to happen.

To claim accountability is to claim the ability to respond powerfully. Leaders are always looking to impact others—to support, to change, and to encourage, to challenge. They look at situations asking, “What can I make happen here? What can I be accountable for right now?”

Sometimes what they can impact may seem small: people are upset about a change. Fine. Perhaps all the leader can be accountable for is helping people get over their upset, so they are ready to start again. Great, that's what can be done now.

If you want to practice leadership, notice when you are focused on blame. Don't blame yourself for blaming. Simply notice. Stop blaming. Start looking for where you can take accountability for actions that will make a difference.

## **3. Leaders see fear—their own and others'—as a signal to look more deeply into what is going on.**

Human beings naturally experience fear when they are threatened. None of us likes to be wrong, to be blamed, to have a sense of being out-of-control. When we feel threatened, our bodies respond as they are designed to do. When the human system becomes fearful—when the tiger is going to eat you or the boss is going to yell--the mind-body reaction is fight or flight. Our bodies automatically move the blood from our brains to our bodies, so that we're ready for fighting or running. We become all about survival, not about creative problem solving. We're *in* a fear state, in its grip. The fear has us, so to speak.

Leaders attune themselves to notice when they themselves are fearful, when they are in the grip of fear. They take a three-step approach to it. Imagine that Jim, a peer, has said to the leader that they've screwed up.

The first step is to **name** it: “I'm in a fear state here. Jim said I screwed up and now I'm scared to death.” Once it's been named, the leader can **claim it**: take personal responsibility for what

she or he is creating by asking something like, “How am I interpreting this situation so that I’m creating myself in fear?” S/he might say, “who said what? What was threatening to me?” and recognize that she is feeling insecure, as if her job is on the line. Jim’s statement is threatening because it says that she might have made a serious mistake.

**Claiming** the fear means recognizing our reaction to whatever stimulated the fear. That lets us be aware of it and to take responsibility for our reaction. Leaders can learn to take a deep breath, which calms the body and sends the blood flowing back to the brain. That lets them be fully aware and able to move to choosing appropriate action. What most people do instead is to sense the fear—and then look outside others and find someone or something to blame for causing the fear. When that occurs, we say that the fear has the person, instead of the person having the fear.

Once the fear has been **named** and **claimed**, leaders then **reframe**. To reframe, leaders get curious about what could be going on. They ask questions, check the situation out, get curious about how it came about, and determine what’s next. “Maybe I did screw up. It wouldn’t be the first time. Now what? What can I create out of this that will move us forward? What’s the opportunity here?”

Humans are designed to be subjective—that is, automatically subject to our strong emotions like fear or love. Fear gets us to run before we analyze the danger. That worked well when we faced tigers, but in business we are merely facing other people who threaten our view of things or our self-concept. Through naming, claiming, and reframing, leaders can recapture what was by genetic design lost a few seconds ago—objectivity. Leadership as a way of being involves developing the skill of noticing what I am feeling and thinking at any moment in time. Once a leader becomes aware of his own fear, he also recognizes others’ fear as well.

Until leaders come to terms with their own fear, they don’t have the distinctions to see the fear in others around them. What they see instead is that someone isn’t cooperating, or isn’t taking their share of responsibility. They see someone who is incompetent. At its worst, the other’s fear stimulates the leader’s fear, because human bodies naturally pick up signals viscerally, through the body’s chemistry and electromagnetic signals. So, a leader needs to be able to see the fear in those around them, in order to take right action in addressing it.

Real leaders see the fear—and they also can see the person who is inside of the fear. Ray may be afraid of losing control. The leader can see Ray’s fear and get curious and interested in it, in what can be addressed in both Ray’s perception of the situation and where control might really be at risk.

To be a real leader then, is to see and be willing to encounter fear in both one’s self and in others. Fear becomes an opportunity to become accountable, through naming it, claiming it and reframing it.

**Don’t Just Look—See.**

Develop leadership through learning to observe, through increasing your awareness about what you naturally notice, what you naturally ignore. Then, develop the art of really seeing, of being able to make the most subtle discriminations to better serve you in leading through the situations and relationships around you.

As wildfire fighter and writer Peter Leschak says, "All of us are watchers -- of television, of time clocks, of traffic on the freeway -- but few are observers. Everyone is looking, not many are seeing."

Be a leader who really sees.

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