

## leadership instalments

### Pressure—The Truest Test of the Heart

By Dan Gaynor

**LEADERSHIP IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS. THE WAY LEADERS** and followers relate to each other is the most important factor in their performance and job satisfaction. Poor leaders can depress the performance of even talented employees, while a great leader can draw the very best from less talented individuals.

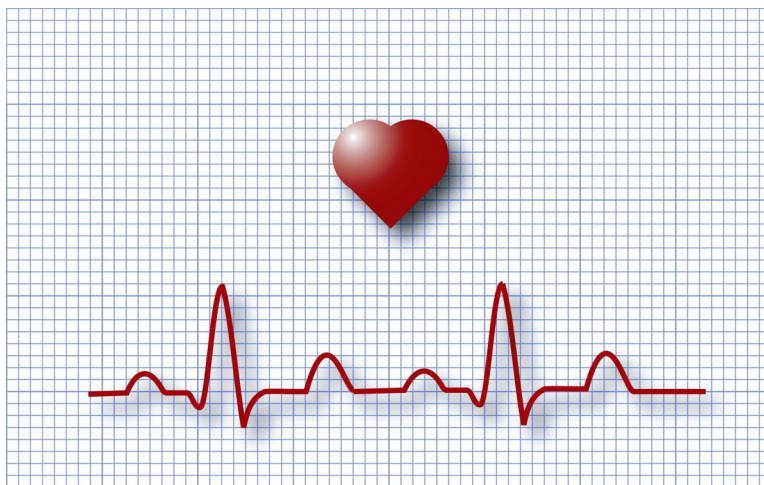
Relationships are largely a product of the leader's heart. While great leadership requires well developed skills, these mean nothing if the leader's heart is not right. Those of us who really know the human condition know that our hearts are powerful. The heart is the foundation of every action. The heart determines how the leader uses the skills.

If it is in a leader's heart to exploit people and circumstances for personal gain, or to place his needs before the team's, he will lead selfishly. Leaders who believe they are the most important part of the team cannot build strong motivated teams. They get reluctant survivors rather than enthusiastic participants.

Relationships are tested most severely when the pressure is on. I once heard it said that one can only tell the strength of a submarine's hull by taking it down - it is pressure that reveals the cracks. This is true of leadership. Smooth sailing tells us little about the leader's heart - we learn what the leader is all about when the pressure is on.

You've probably worked for a few leaders who had the wrong hearts. They are not hard to find. Sometimes they pit people against each other or they are quick to take the credit for the work others have done. They grab the spotlight whenever they can. When the team struggles they distance themselves from the responsibility. When the pressure is on they often react with anger and frustration when the team needs encouragement and support.

For a brief time, I worked closely with someone like this. More than anything, he cared about how every situation made him look. Consequently, he personalized every setback and this led him to take his frustrations out on his team in angry outbursts during which he often criticized others in front of their peers. Nothing they did was ever good enough. He thought of himself as a caring leader but under pressure, his temper always got the best of him. He ended up chastising good people for doing the best they could at the very time he should have



been encouraging them. I watched skilled and dedicated people become deeply disheartened. It often took them days to get past the outbursts. Their performance plummeted. One's best work is the all a leader should expect. You will face the truest tests of the heart when the pressure is on.

Get the heart focused in the right direction, toward the needs of the team and the mission and you will not fall into this ego trap. You'll see pressure from the perspective of those you lead. Your heart will lead you to care for them. You will steer them through rough water with confidence, providing the support and encouragement they need to stay focused and positive. They in turn won't want to disappoint you. They will stay focused and work hard as a part of your team.

You will learn much more about yourself and the other leaders around you during a time of pressure than you will in good times. Pressure brings out the best in great leaders and the worst in poor ones. The determining factor is the disposition of the leader's heart. Great leaders are patient and encouraging under pressure. Rather than creating additional pressures, they shield their teams from all but the most necessary pressures when they are doing their best work. This is all you can ask. When you are receiving it, make sure your team knows you appreciate it.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Thinking about the best and worst leaders you have worked for, what were their characteristics?
2. How have leaders you have known reacted to pressure and how did their reactions affect their teams?
3. What steps can you take to ensure you don't fall into the ego trap when you are under pressure?

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