The Titleless Leader

our present feelings. And two, let's utilize our authentic selves in
order to propel us to our next level; not keep us where we are."8

Getting results from others involves showing up. When you
bring the best of who you are (at the core level) to your work,
others follow your lead, contribute trust, and authentically show
up as well.

People follow people who put their trust in them and help
them shine. Do that, and the influence and the results you get at
work will surprise you. Do that consistently, and you've mastered
an essential element of being a titleless leader. Ralph Waldo
Emerson put it well, "Trust men and they will be true to you;
treat them greatly and they will show themselves great."

TWO

Better Together

"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want
to go far, go together."
—African Proverb

During the Beijing Olympics, beach volleyball players Misty
May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh were undefeated in their second
gold medal Olympics, with an amazing record of 108 consecutive
wins. Watching the advancing duo during the Olympic coverage,
I heard commentators mention that when either woman was
asked during individual interviews which one was better, they
responded, "We're better together."

That contrasts sharply with end-zone-prancing receivers,
ego-encrusted celebrities, and I-did-it-myself executives, whose
look-at-me antics communicate the belief that their success has
nothing to do with their teammates' skill, coaches' mentoring,
or staffs' support. That behavior alerts coworkers, teammates,
or followers that their talents, ideas, and collaborative spirit are
not wanted here.

I'm sure you know people like this. They take credit for a
group's success, brag about a promotion as if they worked in
isolation, or claim the idea or results as if a sole-proprietor.
These people hoard information, steal the spotlight, and play a one-winner game. While they view success as purely their doing, any failures belong to bad trainers, poor bosses, incompetent coworkers, or terrible workplaces. They blame others, shirk accountability, and offer excuses for missed results.

But, titleless leaders see it differently. They see the collective talent, the team effort, the individual contributions in each success. They understand without the person who can sell the idea, or those who can execute it on the team, the idea flops like a burned pancake. They know without the relationship-wizard who can maneuver silos and bureaucracy to get the purchase order signed or the work order elevated, wishing and hoping persists until the clock runs out. And they’re well aware without someone to plan, strategize, and analyze issues, the focus dissipates.

Yet, being better together requires more than knowing you need different people to bring and apply their magic to the team, project, or task. No matter their role, titleless leaders operate with basics that enable others to do what they do best. That’s what you’ll find in this chapter.

Engaging strengths

Uncommon leaders getting results without title are like my toddler granddaughter playing with her shape-sorter. She understands there’s a unique shape for each opening, and they do, too. Some of us are the trainers, not the players, the techies not the promoters, the teachers not the students, the visionaries not the tactical implementers. Some of us are the cheerleaders, supporters, and encouragers that foster others’ success. Some of us are the stars and some of us are the supporting casts that enable stars to shine.

As motherhood and apple pie as that sounds, not everyone agrees in theory or in practice. Creative people often value the idea more than the execution. Those who are technical might view analytical thinking as higher or harder than relationship-building. But, doesn’t it depend on what you’re trying to do and why? People who work in disciplines often referred to as the “hard-side”—finance, IT, product development, research, engineering, operations—tend to think that those on the “soft-side”—human resources, customer support, communication, sales, administration—have easier jobs, and vice versa.

But the reality is, we typically value higher what we know or do, and undervalue what we don’t.

Whatever is easy for us is easy for us. As best-selling author and columnist, Harvey MacKay Tweeted, “The only things that are truly work are the things we don’t do well.” That thinking is the foundation for a better-together approach—help people excel at what they naturally do well, and work with people who do well what you don’t.

Who wants to work with, around, or for someone who uses his or her talents, brings out the best in them, helps others shine, inspires interesting challenges, and an engaged synergy? I’ll go out on a limb and say, most of us.

Titleless leaders recognize, build upon, and engage self-strengths and the strengths of others, to achieve exceptional results. They get together people who compliment each other’s skills, build teams that embrace differences, and ignite thinking that celebrates new perspectives. This isn’t done because there’s an organizational directive or program, but because they have an inherent belief in the power of individuality adding value to the whole. Gallup’s work with more than one million teams found the best performing ones had strengths in four domains: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking.²

Yet the practical reality is you may not be able to bring people together who compliment each other’s skills, or build a team from scratch. You might join an existing group already working on a project, or someone might assign you one. What then?
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No matter how you come to the work or the people involved with it, those who get results recognize the same three notes apply:

**They're not you.** People have their own style, interests, and approaches. Let them. When a technical person tells me it's not a problem, I understand it's not a problem for them. But for us technically challenged folks, small glitches can be big hurdles. I'm sure there are IT people I've worked with who have less-than-flattering judgment about my ability. Yet, give me a blank piece of paper! Don't judge others on the basis of your own strengths, passions, personality, or goals.

**Everything is not a team meeting.** Don't make it one. Do you ever watch people on required conference calls with their phones muted? They're tuned out, writing e-mails, playing with apps, talking to others, tweeting, and handling miscellaneous tasks. Someone somewhere made the decision everyone involved needed to be on a call or attend a mandatory meeting, whether or not any agenda items applied. People need flexibility over time and tasks. They'll know what issues and with whom they need to be involved if the vision of expected results is clear.

**You're not in charge of anyone but you.** People are responsible for themselves. Others are drawn to those who model and reinforce self-directed accountability. When people have a sense of autonomy in their work, it fosters results, commitment, and engagement. Facilitate and manage tasks, not people, by operating with trust, (see the dimmer switch approach in Chapter 1), and creating an environment in which people can be self-motivated.

Better Together

Understanding that each person brings different talents and unique abilities to the workplace is common sense. Turning that knowledge into exemplary results requires two titleless leadership behaviors:

**First, know thyself.** Understanding what makes you stand out (your strengths) has been a popular approach for more than a decade. Contemporary wisdom and performance psychology is nudging workplace review systems and competency-based talent management initiatives to be less centered on identifying and addressing areas for improvement, and more about leveraging and enhancing areas of strengths.

StrengthsFinder 2.0 by Tom Rath, using Gallup's popular strength assessment, and Marcus Buckingham's StandOut with its strengths tool, as well as numerous instruments easily sourced on the web, are good places to start. Any can help identify natural talents and provide ideas for building them into strengths. Note the word "build" in the last sentence. Operating from strengths means adding knowledge, discipline, practice, and hard work to make our innate talents come alive. Just look at the effort Olympic athletes put into their natural strengths to become great.

One of my talents is in the communication area. Yet, if I hadn't focused on developing skills in writing and speaking, and hadn't been disciplined to enhance those seeds, I would never have leveraged them into a dominant force that brought me interesting and expanding corporate roles. Today, they're my self-employed way for earning a living.

The message isn't strengths or weaknesses. You're a blend. In most positions, you'll build strengths to succeed, shore up your weaknesses with others whose strengths complement your weaknesses, or move yourself from a weakness to a moderate skill. We can become quite good in areas not our natural
talent, partially because we need to in order to succeed in our roles. You may be the best relationship builder in your company, but if you’re terrible with administrative details or negotiating a contract, you’ll find your sales role difficult unless you partner with others, or develop your weaknesses. But once that’s done, your sweet spot is in your strengths.

Gallup Research punctuates this understanding: “The most effective leaders are not well-rounded at all, but instead are acutely aware of their talents and use them to their best advantage.” In fact, they found, “those who strive to be competent in all areas become the least effective leaders overall.”

Still, that may not be enough. If you can’t sing, no matter how hard you try or how great you dance, you’re not going to get the lead in a Broadway musical requiring excellence in both. As author Tom Rath put it, “You cannot be anything you want to be—but you can be a lot more of who you already are.”

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**So, Who Are You?**

*Personal insight is more likely if you write your answers.*

1. Of all the things you do at work, home, and with people or community, what brings the most compliments? Any surprise you? Consider hints about your talents here. People often see things in us that we don’t see in ourselves.

2. If you volunteered to join a virtual team starting a non-profit initiative you were passionate about, what would you want to get involved in? What else interests you where you would want to offer help? Why?

3. When you’re hitting your stride, immersed and focused with ease and grace, what are you doing? What talent are you using here that enables you to do what you do?

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**Better Together**

**Second, help others thrive**

There are many ways to help others thrive, but the most important for titleless leaders doesn’t come from a list of tips (although they’re helpful). It comes by way of orienting to the world, of interpreting and responding to people and situations. That mind-set, or winning philosophy as I call it, is this: “only when we’re all winning do we truly all win.” (See Chapter 8: Cornerstone Behaviors).

Beyond a winning philosophy, how do you apply a better-together approach in the real world of work? How do you enable others’ strengths to achieve results, especially without title or authority, or in a dotted line workplace? Below are practical tips to get you started:

- **A reason for being.** We all need to feel that what we do matters. It doesn’t have to be solving world hunger, but the purpose or vision behind the work needs to be clear and emotionally potent. How are you making people’s lives better? Answer that about your task, project, product, service, idea, or passion. My company helps people live their life’s potential. That thought is a lot more invigorating to me than simply writing articles and books, or developing and leading workshops.

- **Choice matters.** Most of us aren’t fond of having tasks assigned. We want choice in what we do, or a chance to volunteer for an assignment. Even when the task is routine or part of our day-to-day responsibilities, having choice when we do it, or how we manage our tasks, makes a different. According to WebMD, “Feeling as if you have no control over your work or job duties is the biggest cause of job stress. People who feel like they have no control at work are most likely to get stress-related illnesses.”
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- **Ask them.** Don’t assume you know what others like to do, what they want to achieve, or why they’re involved. Help people reach their goals by finding out what the goals are. The person who volunteered for the picnic event team may be interested in meeting people from other departments, learning how to negotiate with vendors, or discovering if they have the aptitude for event planning. When titleless leaders assist others to get the knowledge, challenges, or experiences they’re seeking, people come back for more.

- **No square pegs.** We try to fit people into pre-set jobs or responsibilities. The outcome is a square-peg-round-hole disaster. Instead, titleless leaders know there are no square pegs. It’s the round holes that need changing. Make a job from two cut up responsibilities to match someone interests and talents, or create a new role to use another’s strengths. When people apply their strengths at work, they’re valued contributors.

- **Create partnerships.** When you act in partnership with others, you help them. You respond quickly, share information, and bounce ideas off them. You seek feedback from them and they from you. You look out for their best interests and vice versa. You push, support, and encourage them, and expect the same. There’s a powerful give and take that grows and both people benefit. We can’t be better together without investing in each other.

- **Give it away.** Titleless leaders go beyond the adage, “give credit where credit is due.” Certainly they do that, but they do something more powerful. They give ideas away because there are plenty where those came from. They give communication away because others need information to succeed.

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**Better Together**

They give recognition away because contributions are everywhere. They give their knowledge, time, and insights away because they ascribe to the law of reciprocity—you get what you give.

- **Speak up zone.** Titleless leaders speak up and encourage others to do the same. Their thoughtful, truthful style encourages others to offer input, disagree, debate, and share alternative points of view. An honest exchange of engaged people creates new ideas, builds trust, and encourages active participation. Twentieth-century Greek architect and planner, C.A. Doxiadis, put it this way: “We do not learn only from great minds; we learn from everyone, if only we observe and inquire.”

- **Bring it.** We are only better together if we bring our best individually. Those who lead from their roles are highly engaged people who stand out by how they operate and who they are. They set the bar high for themselves. Others respond in kind.

### The existing state/the possible state

After studying more than a million work teams, Gallup researchers concluded the odds of being engaged at work are just nine percent when individual strengths aren’t being used. Yet, engagement spikes to 73 percent when they are. That simple difference is a critical ticket to results, especially as Gallup polling continues to report that the majority of employees are disengaged at work.

Certainly, there are many reasons why discretionary efforts are tamed, passions for work are fleeting, and ideas are tethered in a time when cynicism is up, trust is diminishing, and enthusiasm is down. But, don’t let any of that stop you.

As a titleless leader, you’re not trying to change the existing state of engagement in your organization. Instead, you’re working to create the possible state in your work group by
applying proven approaches from the field of psychology that increase engagement, well-being, happiness, motivation, and results. That operating difference can’t help but attract people to your circle of influence and increase your results.

In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink remarks, “The problem is that most businesses haven’t caught up to this new understanding of what motivates us. Too many organizations—not just companies, but governments and nonprofits as well—still operate from assumptions about human potential and individual performance that are outdated, unexamined, and rooted more in folklore than in science.”

On page 46 are a few myths that continue despite new findings from a variety of sources, coupled with tips and behaviors that bring results.

Most of us know something special when we see it. We know an average meal from an excellent one, great service from run-of-the-mill, and exceptional results from mediocre ones. But, we don’t always know how superb results happened. Titleless leaders do. Their winning philosophy, their approach fostering environments for self-motivation, and their better-together ways make the difference.

**It takes two: mutual respect**

You can align with the latest psychological research and survey findings, and understand and leverage your own strengths and the strengths of others, but you’ll fall short of the powerful results of titleless leadership without mutual respect.

We could discuss the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who postulated in the 18th century that, “all persons
are owed respect just because they are persons, that is free rational beings. To be a person is to have a status and worth that is unlike that of any other kind of being; it is to be an end in itself with dignity." Yet that “moral recognition respect” is loftier than what’s needed in the reality of most workplaces.

The challenge of mutual respect is punctuated by something most of us recognize. Author Robert Fuller labels it, “rankism.” In his book, *Somebodies and Nobodies*, he says rankism is “what people who consider themselves somebodies do to people whom they regard as nobodies. Think of it as a degrading assertion of rank.”

That concept first hit my developmental screen when I was in graduate school. Taking time off to earn enough money to continue my education, I was fortunate to find a teller position in a local Credit Union. No longer a book-carrying, jeans-wearing student who might be the next scientist, Supreme Court justice, or corporate CEO, my brown-bag lunch and thrift-shop attire with hair in a twist left no doubts I was employed in a "regular" job.

Waiting on community members, university students, administrators, and professors in my new-found role was as good as any official psychology experiment for this psych major. Just like positive traits are sometimes unconsciously attributed to better looking, more athletically fit individuals, I experienced people who treated me differently, attaching greater importance to ideas, suggestions, and input based on my position. My observation: to most people I was the position, not the person who held it.

That observation was confirmed years later as a young mother working nights at a department store to make ends meet. And again as a new manager surprised to notice it was position level, not the merit of an idea swaying brainstorming groups.

Too often we value ourselves and others by titles held, not contributions made. We mix up a person’s abilities, talents, and worth with their occupation or position. We forget a job is something you do, not who you are. Hearing a senior management friend tell stories about a star performer, I queried further expecting a rising star from the executive training program only to hear he worked in the stockroom. No filters blocked her vision of talent or level of respect for him.

Those operating with a titleless leadership approach don’t respect people on the basis of the job they’re in, the titles they have, or the letters after their name. They don’t operate with somebodies and nobodies ranking. In the words of Malcolm S. Forbes, “You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him.”

The mutual respect formula starts with you. Yet, the approach isn’t about changing the big world of work, it’s about getting things done in a smaller one—yours. Much like operating with trust, operating with mutual respect works the same way. You get respect by giving respect.

**Another reason why**

Titleless leaders using a better-together approach not only achieve exceptional results, but discover an added benefit. Professor Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, in his book *Flourish*, wrote, “Well-being is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships and accomplishment.” Being a titleless leader elicits well-being for yourself and others by tapping into all three. And if that’s not enough reason for you to adopt a better-together approach, consider how much you’re needed:
[In 2010]...more than 25 million people were actively disengaged at a cost to U.S. employers of $416 billion in lost productivity.”

“Job satisfaction is at the lowest in two decades.”

“If the job satisfaction trend is not reversed, economists say, it could stifle innovation and hurt America’s competitiveness and productivity.”

THREE
THE WHOLE PERSON

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

—Maya Angelou

Henry Ford is reported to have quipped, "Why is it that I always get the whole person when what I really want is a pair of hands?” It may seem the right approach to distance yourself at work, to hire the hands, heads, or voices to do what needs to be done, and keep the real person out of the mix. But keeping people’s emotions, feelings, thoughts, weekend happenings, families, and interests away from the workplace won’t get the results you seek.

In the pre-24/7 world, the line of demarcation between work and home was clear. Today one bleeds into another with sometimes messy or challenging complexity. While that’s true, it’s not the reason why you want to engage the whole person.

Long before 24/7 became the technological and behavioral trend, people getting great results knew this secret—people work for people, not for companies. People choose who gets their discretionary efforts, enthusiasm, and ideas. When you