Leadership Is Like Tennis,

Not Egyptology

The Four Essential Strokes You Need
To Be A Great Player

(With apologies to my Egyptologist friends)

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Some time ago, I used to periodically run a daylong leadership development workshop for my employees.

My objective was to pull together all the insights about leadership I'd gained in my years of business into a hard-hitting, cohesive, and interactive day.

I was pointedly trying to transform the participants, and **give them a framework for becoming the best leaders they could be**—something they would really use, and not just put on their shelves like the last management seminar they attended.

A DEFINITION THAT REALLY WORKS

I used to start the workshop by going around the room and asking each person to give me his/her definition of "leadership" and writing it down on a whiteboard. When we got done we'd have a whole bunch of words and phases associated with leadership, but no cohesive definition.

Then I would say, OK, none of these phrases are wrong, but let me give you my own definition of leadership—a definition that is deceptively simple, yet quite powerful (if fully understood) in helping one become a great leader. Here it is:

> *A leader is someone who figures out the right things*
> *and makes them happen.*

Why is this definition so powerful? Well, because:

> It has nothing to do with position, title, or power. **Anyone can be a leader in any job**.
>
> It correctly states that to be a great leader, you have to be a great thinker. But a great thinker isn't necessarily a great leader. Someone who knows how to figure out the right things *but can't make them happen* might be a great professor, but not a great leader.
>
> Likewise, there are people who know how to make things happen, but can't figure out the right things. They might be great team members, but they could also steer the boat at full speed in the wrong direction!
>
> The definition pointedly says, "make the right things happen." **Making things happen through other people can be just as**

valuable as doing them. On the other hand, doing things yourself can often be the right choice as well. Whatever it takes to make the right things happen. It's all very situational.

The measure of success is results, not activities. As Peter Drucker used to say, "a manager does things right, whereas a leader does the right things."

Believe it or not, I routinely use this simple definition to help me get **unjammed on some really thorny business issues**, just because it forces me to step back and ask myself, "Am I stuck because I don't know what the right thing is, or because I don't know how to make the right thing happen." The answer to this simple question often leads to very different courses of thought and action, and this simple distinction often leads to the "light bulb" that solves the problem!

TENNIS, NOT EGYPTOLOGY

Like the title says, *"Leadership is like Tennis, not Egyptology."*

Egyptology is a "knowledge-based" discipline. Other skills, like communication and analysis, are useful, but the essence of being a good Egyptologist is how much you know. In general, the more you know, the better an Egyptologist you are.

Tennis, in contrast, is a **"skill-based" discipline**. It really doesn't matter how much you know. What matters is how well you can apply a very small number of skills.

In tennis, there are only four basic strokes—forehand, backhand, volley, and serve. Everything else is just a variation. You can read umpteen books about it, but what matters is how well you can hit the ball when you get on the court. In fact, lots of great tennis players read no books about it at all. To get better, they just go out and practice more.

Leadership is like tennis, not Egyptology. The way you excel at it is by **getting really good at applying a very limited number of skills**, not by reading more and more about it.

I learned this in a dramatic fashion. Early in my management career I used to go to the bookstore and library and walk out with an armful of all the latest books on leadership. This went on for several years. Then one day, I started reading the next book and thought it was really great—just what I needed. I

got about a third of the way through it, when I suddenly realized I had read the book before!

Ever since then I have concentrated on **distilling leadership down to its essential skills** and practicing those skills day in and day out, rather than reading more and more about it. This is comparable to learning to be a great tennis player by playing more tennis instead of reading more books about playing tennis.

So OK, then, what are the leadership equivalents of the four tennis strokes? What are the essential skills we need to develop? They are, quite simply:

1. **Communication**

2. **Creative Problem Solving**

3. **People Leadership**, **and**

4. **The Inner Game**.

TENNIS STROKE #1—COMMUNICATION

Early in my own career, I attended a seminar that taught a specific technique for dealing with angry employees who storm into your office all upset about something. The technique had five steps—**Listen, Empathize, Clarify, Problem-solve,** and **Take action**—resulting in the rather clumsy acronym **LECPT**.

Since I didn't have a lot of angry employees at the time, I started using this model for other types of situations as well. Little by little, as I watched how great leaders worked with their teams, I started to realize that **LECPT is a great model for all communication, not just crises**.

And I started to get much better results when people came to me with any issue by consciously **Listening** carefully, then making sure that the person I was listening to knew that I **Empathized** with him or her, then asking questions to really **Clarify** the problem or issue, brainstorming possible ways to **Problem Solve**, then finally, agreeing with the person that we would **Take action** in some specific way as a result of our discussion. It seemed to work wonders.

Eventually I discovered that if I added an **Introduction** step at the beginning, I could use this same model for discussions that I initiate. I had the blockbuster insight that, even if I'm initiating the conversation, it's much more likely to be highly productive if I just briefly **Introduce** it, and then

Listen, Empathize, Clarify, Problem Solve, and **Take Action**. Apparently, this sequence of steps goes to the heart of what makes people open up and truly work together effectively. It systematically gets them involved in solving a problem, instead of getting stuck in the usual conversational dead-ends.

So now we have the even clumsier acronym—**ILECPT**. But trust me, properly developed, this approach is just like having a great forehand in tennis.

Let's see if I can expand your thinking on how vital this is by listing a number of other situations in which it can and should be used:

- **Group meetings**. Just follow the same **ILECPT** sequence to run a successful meeting.

- **Conversing with yourself**. You can often work your way out of your own mental logjams by going through LECPT in your brain, sort of like becoming your own best friend!

- **Handling complaints and blowups**—the original purpose of LECPT.

- **Giving feedback, whether negative or positive**. Either way, knowing exactly what's on the other person's mind is the best way to make the feedback useful and productive. (Later you'll see that feedback is one of five essential elements of tennis stroke #3.)

- **Restoring broken trust and confidence**.

- **Overcoming personal style differences** (more on this in a moment.)

- **Virtually any interpersonal or problem solving situation.**

Dealing With Different Personality Styles

Most leadership seminars include some sort of grid showing the different types of personalities. Some of you are undoubtedly familiar with these. Maybe you have even been analyzed as to your own personality type and where you fall on the grid.

Most commonly, these grids classify people into one of the following four primary personality styles:

- **Analyticals**—whose primary style is to analyze.

- **Drivers**—whose primary style is to drive forward to action.

- **Amiables**—whose primary emphasis is on liking each other and working together.

- **Expressives**—whose primary emphasis is on feelings and expressing those feelings.

The key to leadership success is not what personality style you are—great leaders come from all styles—but rather how good you are at relating to people who are different from you. For example, an analytical person who can only relate to other analyticals is not going to be a very effective leader compared to an analytical who understands and embraces the fact that people are different. **Part of great leadership is being able to work well with people of all personality styles**.

Believe it or not, this concept is embodied in LECPT! You find that people tend to get stuck in whatever part of the model most suits their style.

- **Analyticals** tend to go **straight to clarifying** and get stuck there. They tend to be not so good at empathizing and taking action. Your job is often to guide them into understanding other people's feelings and taking action.

- **Drivers** often seem to want to go **straight to taking action,** skipping everything else—the listening, the emphasizing, the clarifying, the problem solving. Often your job as a leader is to slow them down and force them through the other steps of LECPT, so they make sure they are driving toward the right thing.

- **Amiables** tend to get stuck in **listening and empathizing**, and you often have to push them ahead into clarifying and problem solving.

- **Expressives** are often more concerned about expressing their emotions than any of the steps of LECPT. Their natural style tells them that's how problems are solved—by **getting everyone's feelings out on the table**. You need to accept and acknowledge all their emotions, learn what you can from them together, then channel those emotions into LECPT.

Your job as a leader is two-fold. You need to understand a person's natural style, and even cater to it to a certain extent when working with him/her—for example, by spending more time clarifying when talking to an analytical.

But then you need to guide a person to extend beyond his/her natural style into the other elements of LECPT if you want to accomplish great things together.

TENNIS STROKE #2—CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

No doubt about it—**great leaders are great creative problem solvers**. They always seem to come up with the different creative angles that lead to a solution. They seem to relish taking on the most difficult problems, the bigger the better. They like it even better if the problem is considered insoluble. **And they see figuring out how to achieve a very ambitious goal as just another problem to be solved**.

I used to think this creative problem solving skill was inherited, and that I hadn't inherited enough of it!

Then I ran into an audio course called "Creative Problem Solving" put out by the American Management Association, and it opened up a whole new world to me.

The basic premise of the course is that **anyone can be a great creative problem solver** if they just understand a few basic principals and practice them routinely in everyday business life. (Sound familiar? Again, it's Tennis, not Egyptology.)

- The **first basic principal** is that **The Big Mess Can Be Distracting.** In other words, it's easy to get so wrapped up in the immediate details of a difficult situation that we lose site of the real problem. Often the "light bulb" solution lies outside the cloud of details we are struggling with. The cloud of the "big mess" gets in the way of us seeing the real problem. And as soon as we see the real problem, the solution often becomes obvious.

  This is similar to the old expression, "he couldn't see the forest for the trees." When you learn the principals of creative problem solving, you will often have the sensation of **flying around in a helicopter while everyone else is driving around in a jeep down in the jungle**.

- The **second big principal** is that we all have **"Stifling Mechanisms"** that get in the way of our natural creativity.

These are habits, patterns, attitudes and beliefs that make routine life more livable, but really stifle our ability to take a fresh view of a problem.

In one illustration from the course, these stifling mechanisms are portrayed as a thick wall standing between a giant light bulb, the "light of creativity", and the messy problem situations we face in our day-to-day work lives. Creative problem solving techniques are shown as **drilling a large hole through the wall of our habits, patterns, attitudes, and beliefs**, and letting the light of creativity shine down on the big blob of the problem.

Our best creative problem solving often comes from our subconscious mind, not our conscious mind. That's why it's quite common to struggle for hours with a problem, be completely stuck, and then have the solution come to us in the middle of the night, or in the shower, when we've stopped thinking about it consciously! The subconscious mind can often see right through the wall.

- The **third basic principal** is that **creative problem solving is often an iterative process, not a linear one**. It is a zigzag line, not a straight line.

  The illustration in the AMA course shows a sailboat zigzagging from the lower left corner of the page to the "home port" in the upper right hand corner. Along the zigzag path, the boat encounters "the reefs of poor planning," then "the whirlpool of unwanted side effects," then "the minefield of unforeseen results and reactions from others," then "unexpected complications," then "additional problems," then "new factors."

  The lesson is that **great problem solving often requires great persistence and a willingness to "just keep going" where others give up or get stuck.**

Creative Problem Solving Tools

I guess these three insights have some value in themselves. But the real payoff comes when they are combined with **a few simple nuts-and-bolts techniques** designed to blast away the obstacles to creative problem solving.

You need to develop your own favorite techniques, but here are my own. A long time ago, I used to call these "paper and pencil" techniques. Today they would most often be done in Word or Excel, or on a whiteboard, if in a group:

- **Random Brainstorm Notes**. Just start writing down bullet points about everything that comes into your head concerning the problem you're trying to solve. Just let your mind go, without trying to judge the content or the structure.

  When you think you've exhausted all the points you have in your head, come up with five more points. Do this repeatedly, to force yourself beyond the obvious. **Your objective is to just get everything out, however illogical, without worrying about how it looks or how it fits together.**

  Put it aside for a day, then start writing more points, until you think you can come up with no more. Often this process will in itself lead to the kind of mind opening that results in an obvious solution.

  But if it doesn't, come back to your random brainstorm list, after some time has passed, and start to **group it into categories and patterns**. Just start playing around by moving things around in you Word document or spreadsheet. You're trying to see the underlying structure of the issues that form the problem. You're trying to get below the surface and discover the "real problem" which will lead to the light bulb solution.

- **Structured Issues Chart.** This is the opposite of the Random Brainstorm Notes. You start by making an outline of all the high level issues and categories you can think of, then you start filling in bullet points underneath the headings in a effort to come up with a better understanding of the problem, and free up your creative thinking.

  It's often very effective, in fact, to alternate back and forth between this top-down structured thinking and bottom-up brainstorm thinking. This process seems to open up the brain and allow new, unexpected ideas to flow in, as though there was another very creative person in the room helping you!

- **Trial Balloon Solution**. Sometimes we have a solution in hand, but just don't realize it, because we're too busy wallowing around in the problem. So sometimes it's really helpful to do what I call a Trial Balloon Solution. You say to yourself, "**OK, I'm going to pretend I have twenty minutes**

to come up with the best solution I can think of at the moment, and then I'm done with it."

You're not really done with it, of course. The problem is still going to be staring you in the face after you formulate your rushed and imperfect solution. But you'll be surprised at how many insights can come from this little exercise.

Sometimes you'll discover that your trial balloon, much to your surprise, is really not all that far off, and with a little tweaking, or a little more exploration, it really works. Other times you'll be way off from a real solution, but the exercise gives you some big insight as to where the real problem lies.

Then, of course, you can try doing multiple trial balloon solutions (one might call this "random brainstorm trial balloons") until you get to the heart of the matter.

- **Plus/Minus Chart**. When my challenge is how to achieve a certain goal (to close a big sale, for example, or persuade someone of my point of view), I usually start with a Plus/Minus Chart.

  On one side of the chart I list all the factors I can think of which favor the result I'm looking for, without structure or judgment. On the other side I list all the obstacles.

  On this first pass I'm trying to come up with as many bullet points as possible, because I know from the basic principles of creative problem solving that the most important issues may be hidden from my view by my stifling mechanisms.

  After I've gotten everything down I can think of, I go back over the lists and circle the four or five factors on each list I think are most important. **Then I put all my efforts into maximizing the biggest plusses and overcoming the biggest obstacles.** This often results in such a focused effort that I am much more likely to achieve my goal.

- **Option Comparison Chart.** When I feel I already know what the valid solutions are, but can't decide which one is best, I use an Option Comparison Chart. Simply list the options across the top of your spreadsheet, and the criteria for success down the left hand side, and start filling in the grid.

Just be careful not to be closed-minded about either the options or the criteria! To make sure, it's a good idea to use random brainstorm techniques to generate both.

- **Make a list of people who can help.** If I'm still stuck after trying my favorite mind-opening techniques, the next thing I do is brainstorm a list of people who can help. I say "brainstorm" because **the best person to help me get unstuck is often not obvious on the surface**, and this requires some creative thinking on its own.

  Get used to asking unexpected people to help you solve your problems. They will be flattered that you asked, and happy to think things through with you. For certain types of problems, you'll find that you should *start* by getting other people involved.

- **List of people who are affected.** Sometimes, your creativity can get a big boost simply by making a list of people who are affected. This seems to personalize the impact of the issues and lead to a clarification of what's really important and what's not.

There are three other important keys to great creative problem solving:

1. **Don't needlessly complicate your problems**.

2. **Distinguish between urgency and importance**.

3. **Try diligently to anticipate potential crises**.

Finally, remember **the importance of focus** in everything you do. The analogy I always used in my workshops is the magnifying glass in the desert:

> Picture a magnifying glass and a piece of paper under a hot desert sun. You could try for a hundred, a thousand, a million years to light the paper on fire by holding the magnifying glass every which way. But when you finally get it lined up at just the right angle, the paper will burst into flames within seconds. Creative problem solving is like that.

After a while, all these concepts and techniques become second nature, a deeply ingrained way of thinking. They affect all your efforts and interactions accordingly, and *you* will be the person who always seems to come up with the creative new idea.

TENNIS STROKE #3—PEOPLE LEADERSHIP

Great leadership requires a **deep understanding of people**.

Excellent communication, as in LECPT, is a vital starting point. But in addition, you need to understand what people need to be successful and motivated in their jobs.

I've adopted a basic framework for this from a Wilson Learning leadership seminar. This simple framework has proven to be one of the most valuable things I ever learned about leadership.

There are five critical things a person needs from a leader in just about any situation:

- **Mission**—why are we here and where are we going?

- **Goals**—what specifically do I need to accomplish?

- **Feedback**—how am I doing?

- **Rewards**—what's in it for me?

- **Support**—where do I go for help when I get stuck?

In the Wilson Learning seminar, each of these was the subject of a half-day of exercises and examples—this was, in fact, the entire outline of the three-day seminar. So keep in mind that I'm summarizing some deep material here.

However—like everything else about leadership—if you get the basic principals right and just practice "hitting the tennis ball" every day, you don't really need all the rest.

Think hard about this framework whenever you are dealing with people, whether you're trying to develop them to their highest potential, or trying to solve a performance problem. Go through each element in your head to try to get a handle on what they really need from you and what's missing:

- **Mission**—Does this person understand where we are going as a company and the importance of his/her role in getting there?

- **Goals**—Does this person understand and embrace the specific goals that need to be achieved?

- **Feedback**—Is this person getting accurate and constructive feedback (both positive and negative) about how he/she is doing in reaching his/her goals? **Use ILECPT to make this most productive, especially for negative feedback.**

- **Rewards**—Does this person feel he/she is adequately rewarded (financially and otherwise) for the contributions he/she is making to the company?

- **Support**—Does this person know where to go for help when he/she is stuck, and does he/she feel perfectly comfortable asking for it?

I have rarely encountered a people problem where there was not a gaping hole in one or more of these five elements. The solution almost always involves explicitly and aggressively filling the appropriate gap. Even if there are few problems to solve, these five elements are still essential for any person to achieve his/her full potential.

Of course, all this assumes that you have the right people to begin with—that they can do the job. But in many cases, people are only ineffective because they are missing mission, goals, feedback, rewards, or support, and once this is fixed, they can become real stars in their jobs.

Different Strokes For Different Folks

Ken Blanchard wrote an excellent book some years ago called <u>Leadership and the One Minute Manager</u>" (not to be confused with the original <u>One Minute Manager</u>, a book based on deeply flawed comparisons between leadership and raising children or training animals.)

<u>Leadership</u> is a very quick read, more like a long essay than a book. It makes another critical point about people leadership—that **people need different things from a leader at different stages of any project**, depending on how much they already know about the work involved, and what their attitude is:

- If a person has low knowledge, he/she needs a highly **directive** style of leadership—you need to tell him/her **what to do and how to do it**.

- As a person gets more competent on a project, he/she needs less direction and more of a **coaching** style of leadership, **more advice and motivating**.

- After a while, a person needs almost no direction, just a **supporting** style of leadership.

- Eventually, a person needs neither direction nor support on a project. In fact you will be a real irritation if you try to provide much of either. What this person now needs is a **delegating** style of leadership.

The important thing is to match your style to the needs of your people, and **these styles are not fixed by person, but vary project by project and over time**. To be most effective, you've got to go into each meeting understanding what each person needs at that particular time, or be able to figure it out through LECPT.

TENNIS STROKE #4—THE INNER GAME

I once made a list of the mental and emotional qualities of the best leaders I know—call it **the inner game of leadership**. These leaders can be recognized by the following characteristics:

1. **Customer satisfaction, quality, and measurable results** are their primary motivations.

2. They have a keen awareness of the **need for communication and teamwork**.

3. A sense of **responsibility and involvement** replaces the "victim" mentality.

4. They take **initiative in solving problems** in a way that transcends the organization chart and "who's right and wrong."

5. Their **people orientation** equals their technical orientation.

6. They have a **deep concern for truth** beyond appearances and the "grapevine."

7. **Persistence and creative problem solving** become deeply ingrained habits that overcome day-to-day frustration.

8. They engage in **continual self-renewal**.

When Stephen Covey's now famous book <u>The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People</u> first came out, I discovered that my eight points above map

quite precisely into the seven habits. In fact, **it is almost the same list, just more tailored for a business setting**.

This list is valuable to develop your own attitude and emotions, but it's also a list of the qualities you need to develop in all the people you work with. In the end business is so much like sports, and **business leadership is like sports leadership**. It can come from the players on the field, or it can come from the coach. But in business, as in sports, the inner game is as just as important as the outer game.

CONCLUSION

JUST DO IT.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Even thought the whole point of this paper is to practice more, not read more, for those of you who want to study further, the following are some of my favorite business books and tapes.

There are great insights in most of the business books on the market today. Just make sure you don't let them interfere with actually getting out on the court. **When in doubt, just take fifteen minutes to read this paper over again and go do something with it!**

The Effective Executive—Peter Drucker.

Creative Problem Solving—American Management Association cassette course.

Leadership—Ken Blanchard.

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People—Stephen Covey.

Working Smart: How to Accomplish More in Half the Time—Michael Leboeuf.

Succeed in Spite of Yourself—Everet Sutters.

Thriving on Chaos—Tom Peters.

Bob Weisenberg, now retired, was President and Co-owner of Northwoods Software Development, a leading internet development, e-commerce, and software programming company. Bob was a finalist in the 2001 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year competition. In 2002, Northwoods was named to the INC 500 list of "America's Fastest Growing Private Companies" for the second year in a row, moving up to #124 from #236 in 2001.

This was not Bob's first company to achieve the INC 500, however. His first INC 500 company (co-owned with three partners) was EMS, which also made the list twice, at #28 in 1983 and #435 in 1984. EMS went on to become one of the leading providers of manufacturing software in the U.S., and in 1994 became Wisconsin's first publicly traded software company. (EMS was sold to the prominent Swedish ERP company IFS in 1999.)

Somewhat of a "renaissance man", Bob is also a musician (flamenco guitarist with a nationally recognized CD who played for six years at Don Quijote restaurant on Milwaukee's East Side), champion athlete (won the Badger State Games in windsurfing in 1987), writer (author of a major paper for the 2000 Wisconsin Economic Summit), and industry organizer (co-founder and first president of Wisconsin's trade association for IT companies—WITLA.)

Bob is also a CPA and received a Bachelor's Degree in Literature from Stanford University.