

PREPARATION: THE KEY TO GREAT LEADERSHIP

by Keith R. Wyche

Please indulge me for a moment. I promise this article addresses an important, rarely discussed leadership topic. But first let me ask whether you remember the childhood nursery rhyme of Humpty Dumpty? I do. And even as a child, something about that poem disturbed me: *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again.*

As I began to advance in Corporate America, I soon identified what perplexed me so much about this common childhood rhyme. Obviously, Humpty Dumpty required preparation and some assistance (perhaps a ladder or a rope) to arrive at the top of this very high wall. Yet, for some reason, he did not prepare for the possibility that an uncontrollable circumstance—loss of balance, a strong wind, a swarm of birds, something—could challenge his position. He didn't prepare to maintain his position or to protect himself against a very serious risk. With so much at stake, how could he just “have a great fall?”

Granted, I'm probably taking this analysis too far. It's an example of one of those things that bugs me more than it probably should. However, this simple example reinforces (in an admittedly elementary way) a lesson I consider to be one of the most important in leadership and mentorship today. All successful leaders embrace the principle of preparation along their journey to the top, but it's only those leaders who don't stop preparing once they've “arrived” who experience long-term significance and inspire leadership in others.

Many would see the principle of “preparation” as too basic to be worthy of serious dia-

logue—especially among leaders who (like Humpty Dumpty) have arrived. But this critical learning may indeed be so basic that its impact is forgotten and taken for granted as we advance to leadership roles. In addition, many of today’s leaders and, more important, tomorrow’s future leaders are falling into preparation booby traps—critical areas where they’re overlooking preparation’s importance and are not fully realizing its stress-reducing benefits.

Let’s get the obvious out of the way. In today’s fast-paced climate, preparation is a fundamental and vital function of corporate success and organizational leadership. The timeless adages still hold true: “Success is where preparation and opportunity meet”; “Preparation + Planning = Success”; “Your best guarantee of success is preparation”; “Work and preparation equals success and confidence”; and the list goes on.

There are many good reasons accomplished figures from Alexander Graham Bell to the Boy Scouts of America have embraced this central principle. The reasons point to a few tried and proven tips successful leaders have wholly embraced throughout the years. If you’re a senior leader, you will be tempted to tune out for the next few points. I challenge you to do the opposite—to consider the last time you employed one of these preparation principles. The point is that preparation is arguably the most important principle of successful leadership, and sadly the first to be neglected when leaders arrive. Never slight the following six aspects of preparation:

- Be prepared by knowing your audiences.

Know your audience is a simple principle that will never lose its significance. Successful leaders invest time to at

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least think about, and at best research intensely, all their audiences—bosses, subordinates, peers, customers, and partners. Before a word is uttered or an exchange takes place, you can rest assured that a successful leader has gone through the mental tango of determining the most appropriate and effective stance for engaging with others. The proven rule for communicating and engaging effectively with others is to deliver information the way others need to receive it and construct exchanges to suit the circumstances and perspectives of others (as much as possible). Successful leaders, executives, or bosses don’t neglect this principle just because they’re in charge.

- Be prepared by knowing your information.

The BS generator can only take you so far. There’s simply no substitute for comprehensive information, true understanding, and solid, relevant facts. Take the time to get the background, know the numbers, assess the context, and become versed in the appropriate language. Successful leaders take the time to know their information. They can sense a shallow argument from a mile away and they understand that confidence comes from knowledge . . . period.

- Be prepared by having your day planned in advance.

As a rule, most successful executives interviewed on this subject confess they take the time each evening to prepare for the next business day. That means everything

from pre-reading the documents to readying the wardrobe the night before. The primary reason: Given their extremely hectic schedules, preparing the evening before allowed them to be mentally ready for the expectations of the day ahead. As a result they often found that they would uncover ways to be more efficient in their tasks, assignments, or meetings.

- Be prepared by rehearsing, and rehearsing, then rehearsing some more.

From a visibility perspective, successful leaders realize all meetings and presentations—whether they're for internal teams or external stakeholders—are opportunities to solidify or tank their personal brand. Your stock will rise or fall quickly depending on how well you are perceived during such meetings and public engagements. I cannot tell you how many career opportunities have been created because a senior executive was impressed with how well someone performed during a meeting or while giving a presentation. After more than 25 years in corporate America, I've learned that, no matter how commanding my title, I'm never too senior to rehearse a speech or presentation.

- Be prepared to never stop learning.

Having a degree may be the requirement for certain management positions, but because market demands change so rapidly, it is important to continuously update what you know. Of course it is important to keep abreast of industry trends by reading trade publications and attending professional conferences. Staying current may also require taking an executive training course. There are a variety of specially tailored programs suited for almost every type of business strategy that currently exists.

- Be prepared emotionally and mentally as well as physically.

In addition to external preparedness, leaders must embrace internal preparedness. The aforementioned tips will increase your confidence, improve your effectiveness, and make you look great, but emotional preparedness will make you *feel* great: mentally and emotionally. This category of preparedness will help guide you through the challenges that test your will, value system, patience, and even your own self-perception.

Confidence comes from knowledge.

This topic is so important that I must share a personal example. As an African American male, I have had many occasions to experience how defeated one can feel if not mentally and emotionally prepared. I recall a time when I joined one of my vice presidents and his director to visit a client for a quarterly business review. It was the first such meeting we had with this client, and we were all very anxious to discuss our great results in working for the client the previous quarter.

As we entered the room, we decided to delay introductions until after we had time to build rapport. As my director, who happened to be an older male Caucasian, began to review the agenda, I noticed that all of the client's attention was being given to my vice president, who was also an older male Caucasian. From a conversation standpoint, nearly all of it was directed at my vice president, and the client even shared with him how well "his" team had been performing.

As we moved onto doing introductions, the director stated how pleased he was to have his president take part in the meeting. Immediately, all eyes went to my vice president, who they assumed was the president. They naturally assumed that there was no way I was the president. However, it was beyond satisfying to see the look on their faces once I began to thank them for their business, and it was clear to them that in fact, the bald-headed black guy was the boss!

Clearly, my ability to maintain my composure in situations such as that did not happen overnight. In fact, if this had happened ten years ago, let's just say I might have been like Humpty Dumpty! I would have fought to make it known that I was the president! But when you are mentally prepared for these types of battles, you learn how to win without becoming bruised or (like our friend Humpty) broken.

Truly visionary leaders are those who never stop preparing.

Investing time and resources for introspection and objective observation will provide immeasurable value for strengthening your emotional and mental preparedness—leading to more composure, foresight, and wisdom in unexpected circumstances. One way to become more prepared in this area is by soliciting the skills and expertise of an executive coach. Typically, companies hire these external coaches to help high-potential executives overcome shortcomings that may be hindering their professional growth. These shortcomings can range from trouble building followership to weak interpersonal communications and a host of other areas that may be creating blind spots for their otherwise promising possessors.

Can you honestly say you are still preparing in all of these ways even in your current leadership role? If your answer is yes, kudos to you—you understand that preparation is a lifelong skill that should never be neglected. But the reality is, along the way, we leaders get a lot busier (unbelievably busier); we also get a lot more help, and as a result we forget that we too need to embrace the principle of preparation.

Sure, we've earned the right to kick back a little and enjoy the fruits of our labor. Still, leadership doesn't mean entitlement . . . despite common belief. Preparation doesn't end here. And, while many leaders continue to perform by surrounding themselves with others who do the prep work, truly visionary leaders—those who live a life of significance and inspire others to be great—are those who never stop preparing.

You see, as technology evolves and forever changes the way Generations X, Y, and Z will engage in the workforce, it is up to today's leaders to continue modeling the timeless and forever-relevant principles that drive

innovation and set the pace for leadership success. Preparation is certainly one of those principles. By modeling and mentoring in this regard, we will help today's and tomorrow's leaders hold true to the lessons that have helped accomplished leaders and world changers continue to raise the bar.

Whatever success you've attained by this point, realize there is still a greater level of success to be obtained through the process of preparedness. And when you achieve that next level of accomplishment, remember this: individual success is admirable, but taking time to help others achieve success is much more important, satisfying, and significant.



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