The Path to Leadership by Chris Newcomb, P.Eng., McElhanney Consulting Services Ltd.

To give you some context to my remarks, here's my personal background in short. I'll start by saying I never dreamt I'd ever become a CEO of company, let alone an awesome one like McElhanney. My rise to the top position in McElhanney was far from meteoric. It's more like the tortoise that won the race.

I never had a career plan, and I never asked for a promotion. I simply did my best every day to learn from my mistakes, to serve those that were paying me, and to be a team player to my colleagues. I never turned down a challenge or an opportunity, and whenever I was tapped on the shoulder for an assignment or a promotion, I was always the guy that was too dumb to say no.

I was raised in England and France, and graduated from Manchester University in England in 1969, long before any of you were born. My first job was a summer job in France, then I emigrated to Canada, and started work for Associated Engineering, coincidently Kerry's current firm, in Vancouver. There I learnt to design municipal engineering projects, and I got my first taste of responsibility because I was willing to take on projects in small towns up north, and to stay there for weeks at a time. I thought I was enjoying myself, because I didn't know any better.

After 5 years I left Associated to work for Canron on a pipeline project in Tanzania, East Africa for 3 years. At the age of 26 I was the only engineer on construction of a pipeline project worth about $300 million in today's dollars, so I had to grow up pretty quickly and be resourceful. By the end of the project I was left in charge of the testing, chlorination and commissioning of the pipeline, liquidation of assets, and termination of 300 staff. Again this experience reinforced the lesson that by being willing to go to places most people won't go, you'll get opportunities for increased responsibility that others don't.

After that I came back to Vancouver where I joined McElhanney for the first time. I spent 2 years there learning to manage projects and write proposals. But the lure of international work was too great, and I took another overseas job, this time in Ecuador in South America. It was another pipeline, and again I found the same experience of more responsibility than I 'd have been given had I stayed in Vancouver.

Finally at the age of 33 I came back to Vancouver and McElhanney for good. I started as a project manager, developing client relationships, writing proposals, managing projects, and hiring people to populate those projects. Eventually the tap on the shoulder came for assistant branch manager, branch manager, vice president, and finally President in 1997 at the age of 49, which probably seems impossibly old to most of you. Along the way I said yes to managing McElhanney's international opperations, I said yes to joining the Board of CEBC, yes to becoming President of CEBC, yes to joining the ACEC Board (actually it was Kerry that tapped me on the shoulder for that one) and yes to becoming Chair of ACEC.

I've remained President of McElhanney for 14 years so far, because during my leadership McElhanney has tripled in size, diversified into new geographic markets, developed new practice areas, maintained profitability in the top 10 percentile for our industry, and, most important of all in my view, become a fun and rewarding place to work. If ever I can't continue to provide that level of leadership to McElhanney I expect to get another tap on the shoulder, telling me my time is up, and that's the way it should be.

The theme I'm going to speak to is that great leaders share many of the same core values. **Great leaders are very different from each other. They don't have the same** personality types or and skill sets. They're all over the spectrum. Some are type A personalities, outgoing and assertive, others go about their work with a quiet confidence, and you have everything in between. But I think great leaders share many of the same core values. I won't pretend I do a good job of adhering to all of these, but I try. I'll give you some examples:

1. **Humility.** Great corporate leaders realize leadership is a privilege. They don't kid themselves that their position somehow makes them better than others. They know they owe their success to their team. If you feel the need to keep proving how smart you are, then you probably aren't.
2. **Empathy.** Great corporate leaders sincerely want to see others succeed, and they derive more satisfaction from that than they do from their own success.
3. **Team ethic.** They see their colleagues as allies and collaborators, not competitors. They love working with other people, and seeing the magic that happens when the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts.
4. **Intolerance of mediocrity.** The great performers on your team know who the poor performers are. If you don't weed out the poor performers the great performers will become demoralized. Great leaders take action, even when it will be unpleasant.
5. **Compassion.** Great leaders don't hesitate to terminate employees when necessary, but they do it in a respectful way.
6. **Self-sacrifice.** Great leaders accept responsibility when things go wrong, and direct the praise to others when things go right.
7. **Leading by example.** Great leaders have to work as hard and as long as everyone else. Employees won't respect a leader that shows less commitment than they do.
8. **Role modelling.** Great leaders know they must continuously earn the respect of their staff. This doesn't mean you can't relax and have fun, but it does mean behaving with self-discipline at all times.
9. **Honesty.** Great corporate leaders are scrupulously honest. Employees need to know they can place absolute trust in their leader. One act of deception or betrayal to a member of your team will undo years of effort in team-building.
10. **Consistency.** As Kerry said, it's important for corporate leaders to be able to change styles, but there must be a current of consistency running through everything you do. Priorities must be consistent. People need to know what to expect when they interact with you.
11. **Fun-loving.** Most great corporate leaders have a great sense of humor. They love their work, they look forward to seeing their colleagues each day, and they want their colleagues to enjoy their work too.
12. **Generous.** Great corporate leaders are generous with their praise for others, but it must be sincere. And they are sparing in their criticism of others, so that when they are obliged to offer criticism it is taken seriously. This comes from Dale Carnegie's Winning Friends and Influencing People, which is where a lot of my ideas come from.

13. **Caring.** Great corporate leaders are genuinely interested in other people, not because they might benefit personally by doing so, but because they care sincerely about the well-being, the self-esteem, and the success of others. This isn't something that can be faked.
14. **Passion.** Some great corporate leaders have a fire-in-the-belly kind of passion, others have a quieter, more reflective approach. Either way, their passion motivates others to share their vision.
15. **Commitment.** Every day, great corporate leaders go to work thinking - how can I make my company a little better by the time I go home today?
16. **Personal Growth.** Great leaders never stop wanting to learn. They know that the more time you spend outside your comfort zone, the bigger your comfort zone becomes.
17. **Patience.** As a corporate leader, if you want to implement an idea, you are usually better off to take the time to build consensus within your organization. If you implement quickly without consensus, it might be a great idea, but it will probably fail if everyone is not pulling in the same direction. In this way, corporate leadership is quite different than, say, project management, where ideas must be implemented within a project schedule. I've seen great project managers struggle as corporate managers; they were successful as project managers because they acted swiftly and unilaterally to bring their projects in on time and budget, but when promoted to corporate management they failed because they didn't have the patience to build consensus for ideas that could improve the company for years into the future if implemented properly.

Some closing thoughts

Leading is easy in good times. But there will always be some bad times - financial difficulties, lost proposals, loss of good staff, betrayals and disappointments. That's when employees look to the leader for inspiration and strength. They need you to give them the confidence that everything will be okay, and tell them what we're going to do to make things better. As a corporate leader you have no time to feel sorry for yourself, you have an audience watching you every day - your staff.

Finally, your most important job as a leader, starting the day you take the position, is to find, groom and appoint your successor. Corporate leadership should not be about you. It should be about the corporation. And the corporation's best interests are served when there is a strong succession pipeline.

Suggested reading:

Winning Friends and Influencing People, Dale Carnegie. My all-time favorite, written in the 1930's, and just as true today as it was then. Teaches you about relationships, and successful leadership is based on relationships.

Small Giants, Bo Burlingham. Case studies of the leaders of firms that chose to be great rather than big. You'll see what I mean when I say great leaders can be completely different, but equally great.

The Leader Who had no Title. Robin Sharma. The writing style is really corny, but there are some great home truths in there, such as the more time you spend outside your comfort zone, etc.