

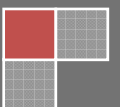
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# Leading in an Instant Society

## Skills and Practices for Tomorrow

This article will explore several of the key skills developed and practiced by leaders who have discovered this phenomenon and are preparing their colleagues for tomorrow—using these skills to operate in this instant world.

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Vinney was smiling as I got out of the taxi in front of the hotel. *Vinney was smiling.* I had stayed at this hotel for years and never had I seen Vinney smiling. At the front desk, everyone was exceedingly friendly and helpful. Not too unusual—after all this was an excellent hotel. Still things felt better. I felt more comfortable, warmer somehow. As I entered the room, I noticed the décor had changed—not a lot, but enough for me to notice the difference, and as my wife will tell you this is not a low threshold for me. A quick call to the front desk informed me that a Japanese chain now owned the hotel. I made a note to speak to the general manager in the morning.

Hans (yes, he was German), said, "I do not know how to answer your question Dr. Austin, we have not changed much."

"But," I stammered, "Vinney is smiling, something must have happened. “ Well," the general manager went on, "when I first arrived I gathered the shifts together and asked them to select one person from each category, one bellman, and one front desk clerk, and so on to make a trip to our two top hotels in Japan."

"What did they learn?" I asked.

"One of the most important things was respect for each other, not just when a big boss comes into the kitchen or when a guest arrives. But they say ‘thank you’ and ‘welcome’ and actually smile for each other."

Now I think we are getting somewhere.

The events just described occurred years ago, but the results are even truer today. Today's leaders may be American, German, Japanese, or any of 305 different nationalities. What they have in common is the need to lead people in an instant global society. We have instant news with CNN; instant, almost, food; collapsing turnaround and response cycles; and we have a society now geared to expect instant results and gratification. Our customers and guests want their products and services as soon as they decide they need them and they want us to make changes when their expectations are not met instantaneously.

This article will explore several of the key skills developed and practiced by leaders who have discovered this phenomenon and are preparing their colleagues for tomorrow—using these skills to operate in this instant world.

## Real time feedback

There is nothing like the joy one experiences in a relationship with real time feedback. You always know where you stand. You need not worry or fret. Leaders develop this skill awkwardly at first. It takes practice, like a golf or tennis swing. In meetings, group discussions, or one-on-one sessions, leaders must learn to observe behaviors that are helpful to accomplishing their mission, and reinforce those behaviors as soon as they are observed. Corrective action and behavior modification can then be implemented instantaneously.

A side note on e-mail. Leaders today are increasingly receiving and sending e-mail. Many are becoming concerned at the amount of e-mail being transmitted. Few have recognized the tremendous advantage of e-mail. It is both candid and it leads to action. People writing letters and memos often delve into background and history; also, people tend to be polite, careful, and somewhat circumspect. Those writing e-mail are drawn into a world that is direct and quick. A world that demands action and results. Leaders set the tone and the frame by example. Use e-mail for quick, frank, response and request options and action steps. Yet, suggest face-to-face time or perhaps ear-to-ear time when it is more appropriate to get some real time feedback.

## Collaboration

Today's leaders are discovering that their competitive orientation and training needs to incorporate collaboration. Like the world of biology, both competitive struggle and collaborative support can and do coexist. While competitive strategy is mutually exclusive, as Michael Porter, the dean of strategy, points out, one must choose either low cost producer OR product differentiation. Collaborative strategy is additive. One can pool resources from many areas or exchange resources or both.

Most interestingly, competitive strategy is usually a zero-sum game. In order to gain market share for example, a competitor or two must lose share. Collaborative strategy can shift a zero-sum or even a negative-sum game into a positive-sum game where everyone wins. Take a group of cranberry growers all competing with each other and bind them together in a cooperative and the whole industry grows and thrives on their combined research and marketing for new products, as Ocean Spray has done.

Leaders today must assess in each situation, whether they are in a competitive or collaborative mode. Information is shared in the latter and held close in the former; boundaries are erased in the latter and drawn tightly in the former; decision-making is open and takes shape over time in the latter and it is closed and quickly undertaken in the former.

## The long view

At first glance, this seems to belie the notion of "instant society." Yet having a long view can allow for more speed in decision making and implementing. When a problem comes up, a leader often must gather information and develop a frame of reference. Having a long view can enable the leader to have these reference frames always in mind.

Witness a youngster trading in the financial markets. His or her experience set often does not comprise enough historical perspective. Thus, short-term decisions are made that can be disastrous. Having a longer perspective of the financial markets can make decisions not only faster but also better.

Building a learning organization can incorporate histories of the company, of a team, or of an individual. Having the long view either in mind or at least available for review can make leading in a real time mode possible.

## Process observation

Results orientation and management by objectives have taught leaders to focus almost entirely on results. Problems erupt when results accrue regardless of behavior. Learning to watch and coach process can assure that the desired results will occur and occur as a consequence of behavior and not simply from serendipity.

Take a young man focused on his result in dating. Talking to women he is dating, they remark that he might just attain his desired result more often if only he paid closer attention to the process of dating itself.

Leaders today must focus on the processes to bring their visions into reality: Structuring processes that map behaviors in enterprise toward shaping repeated success.

## Intuitive thinking

Most leaders today were trained to think analytically. This is the scientific method brought to the business world. Define problems, develop options, gather facts, and then select the best option. The process is efficient and repeatable. More importantly, when the assumptions and premises are right, it is the best method to use. But what happens when the problem is ambiguous or when the timeframe is too short to allow all the analysis to be carried out? Then leaders must employ their intuition. The average analytical process takes hours, yet Dr. Henry Mintzberg's research, a professor at McGill University and author of *Managerial Work*, showed that the average leader's task is only 6-7 minutes. Hardly time to set forth options much less to gather facts.

Leaders must then develop their intuitive capability. This translates into developing one's sensory capability. We all assume that we have five senses. Aristotle discovered these five some 2,000 years ago. Medical science has discovered much since. We have a sense of balance, pressure, hunger, thirst, time, gravity, and position, just to name a few of some three dozen senses described in biology texts. Time to head to the bookstore or amazon.com.

Leaders who develop their sensory perception for all of their senses will greatly improve their intuitive thinking capability. In addition, you will have a great deal of fun learning, for example, that there are four different sets of taste buds on your tongue which will allow you to better position foods and drinks you taste. Have fun! But take care; the IRS might not accept this notion as justification for expensive wines.

### **Next steps**

Get yourself a journal. It is a little-known fact that great leaders keep journals. Yes, from President John F. Kennedy to your CEO. Journal keeping saves time. This is a shocker. Why? Remember your last mistake? Well, writing it down in a journal kept only for yourself stops you from having to relive the mistake, over and over again.

Make a page in your journal for each of the above side headings. Make a note to do something, one little thing for each heading. Then just do it! And, watch your Vinnies smile like a Nike logo.