

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE EYE OF THE STORM



By Michelle Maldonado

The path to authentic leadership often entails overcoming adversity. For TalentPlanet CEO Dr. Gregory Ketchum surviving Hurricane Katrina while stranded in New Orleans inspired him to reevaluate his own leadership strategy and convey the lessons learned to others. I recently met with Dr. Ketchum (commonly referred to as “Dr. Greg” by his clients and colleagues) to discuss his five principles of authentic leadership and how leaders can effectively apply them in their daily lives.

Q: Can you share with readers your life-changing experience immediately after the hurricane?

Dr. Greg: My flight out of New Orleans was cancelled so I had no choice but to wait out the storm at my French Quarter hotel. Over the next several days we were dependent on the hotel managers for food, water and information. They arranged for buses to evacuate us, but the buses were seized by the National Guard under the cover of martial law. Food and water ran out. On the fourth morning

after the storm I awoke to something that made my heart race—dead silence. I discovered the front doors of the hotel were chained and padlocked and that I was the only person left in the hotel. I had been abandoned. Even the New Orleans police were of no help when they encouraged me to walk to the Convention Center, but refused to give me a lift as they said their police vehicles would draw gunfire if they drove down to that vicinity. I had to quickly find a way out of the building and the city using my own devices. It forced me to switch from looking outside of myself for full resolution of my situation. It forced me to make what I call a leadership switch.

Q: In retrospect, what lessons did you learn?

Dr. Greg: I discovered that to be an authentic leader you must first live an authentic life. What this meant for me was that I had to align my thoughts, words and actions with my core values and belief system so that I could move forward with greater effectiveness, confidence and mindfulness regardless of my situation

or circumstance. It’s important to remember that, whether people are facing a dangerous predicament or a challenging business problem, it’s critical to switch from looking outside themselves to looking inward to find the solution. To do this effectively, I encourage leaders to focus on five principles:

1. Access, Trust and Act on Your Gut Instincts
2. Learning to be a Leader is Fundamentally an Experiential Process
3. Your Ability to Deal with Reality is Key
4. Acknowledge and Understand Your Own Weaknesses to Develop Your Full Leadership Potential
5. Never Hand Over Complete Responsibility for Your Situation to Authority Figures

Sometimes leaders hesitate to act on their own intuition. But, it can often signal to you that it is time to go beyond what is conventional wisdom. This can be particularly true when interacting with persons in positions of leadership authority. Looking back at my

experience during Hurricane Katrina, I was too dependent on the powers that be to get me out of a bad situation. I was focused on external factors, which caused me to lose my situational awareness. The solution became immediately clear once I made that leadership switch and started looking inside myself, which gave me a fresh look at my situation. As leaders we must learn to access, trust and then act on our gut instincts. Our intuition may not always be right, but it has to be the point from which we start in making critical decisions.

Q: What do you mean when you say that learning to be a leader is an experiential process and how do authentic leaders harness it?

Dr. Greg: You can learn a lot by reading leadership books, but becoming an authentic leader is fundamentally an experiential process. Sometimes it takes experiencing a crisis—it doesn’t have to be death defying—but overcoming setbacks not only forces us to rely on our intuition and stay engaged, but they also encourage us to consult our intuition to guide us through. As an example, I often see managers do what I call ‘drive-by delegation.’ It’s a classic problem that over time causes leaders to stay in the role of individual contributor rather than stepping up to be an engaged executive leader. I encourage leaders to focus on engaging their teams by creating a real and honest dialogue. Rather than just assign work, discuss projects openly with your team. This will give you an opportunity to gauge readiness and in return, your direct reports will better understand the expectations. Authentic leaders are able to provide leadership experiences for their teams, effectively leverage insights gained from their situational awareness and fully engage their teams so that each person has ownership of the solution.

Q: If your ability to deal with reality is key, how do leaders recognize that a switch is needed to adapt to a new and changed reality?

Dr. Greg: If you find yourself enmeshed in an ongoing struggle; the struggle itself is the signal that a switch is needed in how you’re dealing with the reality of your situation. When adversity strikes sometimes we are too focused on what should be happening rather than dealing with what is happening. During the initial hours of Katrina the phrase that kept running through my mind was, “This shouldn’t be happening now,” and as long as I was stuck

in that mode, I was blocked. It’s important that leaders make the switch to be able to accept and deal with a fast-changing reality. Only then can we understand the new conditions and answer the question—what do I need to do to navigate my way through this dilemma? For example, I see this all the time when leaders are either unwilling to adapt or are simply unaware of the changes in the workplace that are being driven by the millennial generation.

Q: How does one acknowledge and understand personal weaknesses to achieve his or her full leadership potential?

Dr. Greg: Authentic leadership means acknowledging your weaknesses that block you from moving forward. Sometimes it means asking for help. Whether because of fear or arrogance, if you find yourself blocked, that’s another signal to step back and identify the cause. You have two options. Step back and take an honest look at yourself in the mirror or work with someone you trust and gain a different perspective. The more you’re able to identify and acknowledge your own weaknesses, in part, through a practice of diligent self-awareness, the more authentic you’ll be as a leader. Remember, the goal is not to resolve all of your weaknesses, but rather to acknowledge and understand them so that over time they exert less power over you, your actions and your decisions.

Q: What should one do if his or her leadership instincts conflict with organizational strategy?

Dr. Greg: During Hurricane Katrina, I made the mistake of entrusting my life implicitly to those in positions of authority. I learned that while other leaders may have our best interests at heart, when push comes to shove, they’re most likely going to choose their own interests. It’s the human factor. In an organization, if you’re receiving instructions on a strategic direction that doesn’t don’t align with your own leadership intuition—don’t ignore it. You have choices in how you respond to your gut. It may mean that you bounce your concerns off a trusted colleague or that you have a direct conversation with your manager. It may also mean that you don’t act, but rather, take a mental note and actively monitor the situation. Whatever course you choose, the point you start from as an authentic leader is by making that leadership switch and accessing and trusting your gut instincts.



About Dr. Greg Ketchum

Dr. Greg Ketchum, dubbed the “Frasier of the Cubicles” by the San Francisco Chronicle, is a former clinical psychologist-turned CEO and media career coach. Dr. Greg formerly hosted a weekly talk show on CNET and XM Satellite Radio on the workplace and careers and was the CBS 5 Workplace and Career Expert for KPIX TV in San Francisco, CA. He presides over an executive talent firm, providing coaching for executives and Fortune 500 companies. A unique mix of psychology and coaching expertise gives Dr. Greg a great understanding of people and what it takes for career success. Combined with his keen insight into today’s job market, Dr. Greg challenges his clients to reach for career success on their own terms. To learn more about Dr. Greg’s Coaching-On-Demand® series, executive coaching and leadership development or other workplace development initiatives, please contact Dr. Greg at drgreg@talentplanet.com.



About the Author

Associate Vice President Michelle Maldonado leads the Corporate and Strategic Relationships team for American Public University System. Michelle is a former practicing attorney with more than 16 years of combined leadership experience in strategic partnership development and planning as well as talent development, coaching and mentoring of professionals across the education, technology, nonprofit and online media industries. Utilizing an authentic and consultative approach, Michelle currently works with corporate and industry organizations to form educational alliances that support overall talent management, leadership development and organizational growth strategies. To learn more about how American Public University System’s career-relevant academic programs and services may help support your talent and leadership development efforts, please contact Michelle at mmaldonado@apus.edu.