

# SLOW DOWN TO LEAD

*Clifton L. Taulbert*

**B**uilding community in the workplace is the dynamic process that connects leadership to those who follow. Leadership and followership are one coin with two sides—they are interdependent and essential for each other’s success. Effective leaders create and support an environment that lends itself to productive followership. They put in the time required to know their people and to ensure that employees buy into the company’s vision and fully understand that their imagination and participation matter. They create a community based on mutual respect and common purpose.

Peter Drucker systematically called attention to the fact that people are the most valued element within the equation for any leader’s success. In Drucker’s words, “Leadership is lifting a person’s vision to higher sights, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.”

For some leaders, providing necessary attention to the mind-set of the team seems relatively simple. Thus it is often overlooked until serious relationship problems occur, production slows down, and innovation comes to a halt—and leadership is called into question. It is during these periods that we end up with age-old workplace reflections. “If the leaders had only engaged with and listened to their people, none of this would have happened. The employees felt left out.” Productive followership requires consistent and intentional leadership focus.

This concept of unleashing the power of community does not represent a new wave of thought—quite the

contrary. For many years, business thinkers such as Peter Senge, Ken Blanchard, Steven Covey—and an array of others—have espoused the positive outcomes from such an approach to leadership. In my own personal experience, the power of community has a dramatic impact on the lives of individual employees, the organization—and the broader society—if embraced, lived out, and passed along.

## You Are Being Watched

Even though employees have signed on to your team—or, more likely, been assigned to it—their productive followership is not guaranteed. To get the best of what they have to offer, leaders must give their people reasons to commit and follow through. In today’s flattened work environment, employees bring incredible “knowledge value” to the process. Their value extends far beyond blindly following orders. They are indeed partners and members of the community, and as such respond best when welcomed into the decision-making process. Employees are looking for specific personal traits in their leaders as their signal to productively follow—going above and beyond minimum work requirements.

As a former consultant and leadership development workshop facilitator for Lockheed Martin, I recall after a large dinner presentation one evening the company’s CEO, Bob Stevens, looking out on the audience of his senior team and saying, “Your people will do what they see you do.” Those nine words carried more weight in my mind—and in the minds of the Lockheed Martin

senior team—than all the graphs and charts that had been shown during the presentation itself.

Mr. Stevens knew that as his leadership team watches him, they too are being watched and discussed. In my workshops, I tell those leaders in attendance that they are discussed at supper tables throughout America. So why not lead to engender positive discussions through consistent and positive actions?

Your personal actions are key to the success of the followership process and building community in the workplace.

## Building Community in the Workplace

Can building community be a high priority in a world that is now being defined by bytes, bits, and Pentium chips? I believe it can. The 21st century emerges as a time of great paradoxes, driven by the presence of new technologies in our workplace—technologies that deliver efficiency, speed, and accuracy, but often at the expense of building human relationships. From our perspective and personal experience, building community must maintain a high priority status within the workplace because . . .

- It is the process that personalizes the vision and the mission statements of organizations.
- It is the process that brings about sustainability of an environment branded by mutual support and feelings of belonging. Mutual support and feelings of belonging are essential for productive followership.

As an African American growing up in America during the era of legal segregation, I was exposed to the concept of community at a basic need level. But my circumstances also showed me the principles that were in place to create the community I needed for success, to move me beyond the rigors of my legally segregated world. That experience became foundational to the rest of my life, and I see it as foundational to establishing and maintaining a progressive and a mutually respectful relationship along the continuum between leadership and followership.

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What happens when leaders embrace an unselfish outlook? There is much to learn from the story of my great-grandfather, Poppa Joe Young. Poppa lived most of his life on the outside of the American dream, but he displayed the qualities necessary to become a successful leader in any workplace.

In Glen Allen, Mississippi, Poppa's front porch was my safe place. With my knees pulled up to my chin, I would sit on the tall steps and wait for him to get dressed. One of my most treasured memories is of Saturday mornings, when I could hardly wait to start riding to Greenville, Mississippi, with him in his 1949 Buick so that I could get my favorite goodies, frozen custard ice cream and hot French bread.

Waiting seemed to take forever, but eventually, Poppa would be ready and dressed in his only suit, now frayed from wear and shining from the constant ironing out of the wrinkles with Ma Pearl's smoothing iron. I loved the sound of the screen door opening. It was tantamount to doors opening to the rest of the world. Now standing on the porch all dressed, this elderly black man would lean down and rub me on the head and ask the question that made my day. "Who's ready to go to Greenville?" My reply was quick and sure. "I'm ready, Poppa."

Together we made our way to the car, and away we'd go to Greenville, only 28 miles away, but it would take Poppa two and a half hours to drive the 28 miles.

Poppa would slow down and pick up Mr. Fields, who had no car and walked right down the middle of the road. He'd slow down and talk to everybody sitting on their front porches and would honk the horn to call others out to talk. He made himself available to others to bring things back from the city for them. His destination was sure, but his journey was slowed down to "talk" and "care" for others.

From the front seat of a 1949 Buick, I learned the vital essence of unselfish leadership: building relationships and building community, a time-honored process that continues to have value in today's fast-moving workplaces. We might not need to "slow down" to build and improve our technologies, but leaders *must* slow down if they are to build and sustain the type of relationships that productive followership requires.

## The Eight Habits of the Heart

Today, I call the day-to-day community-building actions of my elders the "eight habits of the heart." Though I saw them years ago—lived out in the Mississippi Delta, a place physically and spiritually quite distant from the big-city hallways of much of Corporate America—I find them to be timeless and universal and of immense value to organizations today. These habits include Nurturing Attitude, Responsibility, Dependability, Friendship, Brotherhood, High Expectations, Courage, and Hope:

- *Nurturing Attitude* is the foundational habit of the heart and definitely demonstrated by the likes of Poppa Joe and others who meandered in and out of my life. Within our workplaces today, a Nurturing Attitude still means being supportive of others, being willing to share one's time and caring unselfishly. Forget your computer chip and the great speed of your technology, both of which may be required to maximize a technical strategy. To attend to the needs of people, we must slow our pace and get to know them. Slowing our fast pace

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to really know your team is the first rule of building and maintaining community within your workplace, and slowing down is Poppa Joe's great lesson for leaders—and for all of us. Quality time will produce quality results. Poppa Joe and his '49 Buick showed me that, and I still benefit from his leadership today. The practices of personalizing a Nurturing Attitude are essential to relationship sustainability within your teams.

- *Responsibility* follows as the next logical habit of the heart. We take responsibility for relationships by sharing knowledge and empowering others to do their best. When I was a kid, Cleve Morman—the ice man of Glen Allen—stepped up and empowered me to learn a new trade through his selfless commitment to my success. He shared his knowledge on how to become a productive young ice man and I learned how. His personal involvement with me had more impact on my life than a well-written e-mail could ever have.
- *Dependability* is essential to building relationships. It's more than a mere word, or the habit we chide others for not having. It's *you* the leader. And today, Dependability is required to balance the depersonalization in our workplaces brought on by rapidly advancing technology. Dependability is personalized when one puts the interests of others above one's own. This is what Poppa Joe did for me and was also demonstrated by Ma Ponk, my great aunt, who later welcomed me into her home. Due to segregation, I had to travel one hundred miles round trip to school each day for four years, but I never missed one day. I graduated valedictorian of my class. Why and how? Ma Ponk personalized this habit by standing on our small front porch each morning, pulling the string of a hanging 60-watt light bulb to

alert the driver that I was going to school. I succeeded due to her unselfish leadership in my life.

- *Friendship* in the workplace is essential. It's the habit that focuses our attention beyond ourselves. It helps us to value others and their feelings, and to welcome their participation. It's not automatic. Building friendship is a decision that oftentimes moves us beyond our comfort zones. When we develop this habit of the heart in our workplaces, we encourage the "touch" that I recall. I recall the annual visit of "Blind Birta," who came to town to experience life and laughter on our front porches. Our adult neighbors personalized this habit in our presence. They made room for her, cut her meat, and shared their lives. Their friendship became her vision. Anticipation and vision are key components of ensuring sensory contact within all the places of our lives, workplaces notwithstanding.
- *Brotherhood (or Sisterhood)* helps us to take opportunities to reach out to others, learn from them, and to share our knowledge. This habit requires thinking and planning to reach beyond what's simply comfortable. Reaching beyond the comfortable is much easier to do now (as we are more accustomed to diversity), but no less challenging for many. As a leader, you have to set the standard you want others to embrace and follow. As a kid who raked fig leaves for an older white lady, I benefited from the actions of someone who reached beyond comfortable and "stretched her table" for me. We

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ate together in her home at a time when it was socially unacceptable. We were in the workplace where we each had a job to do, and the unselfish act of stretching her table became the leadership example that still moves me today.

- *High Expectations* demand that we not abdicate to the daily routines of getting the job done our role in lifting the sights of others and celebrating their success. In Glen Allen, people saw their visions for life extended through us, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And this is the challenge of leadership today—to understand that the "vision" does stop at your door. Others must be welcomed and their gifts fully utilized. Back home there was an old man who stuttered, but who also was a leader in celebrating others. He was our "Man of La Mancha." He saw in us what we didn't see in ourselves and in his stuttering voice he challenged us to embrace the positive picture he saw.
- *Courage* is not an abstraction. It takes a person, a leader like you, to stand up and do what's right, to speak out on behalf of your team, and do so even in the absence of support. Courage always involves taking risks. Courage rewards not only those who practice it but those who witness it. In this century, when the paradoxes of modern convenience seem not to support the need to reach out to others, or to lend the influence of your position, the need for courageous leaders still remains. I saw an overlooked people struggle courageously against the reach of legal segregation into their lives. Their daily acts of unselfishness were driven by their courage—the belief that others then and now would benefit from their right actions. Our 21st-century leaders will need this same courage on a daily basis as we face the impact of accelerating change.
- *Hope* is the eighth habit of the heart, and it emerges in our lives and within leadership when we slow down, like Poppa Joe, and take the time to get to know people. Hope is believing in tomorrow, and not being stifled by change or a challenging task seen today. This ability for others to look ahead and remain productive comes about as leaders allow

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themselves to be the positive voice that keeps the team focused. In Glen Allen, it was “fessor White” teaching my parents’ generation as if the whole world could hardly wait to embrace their achievements, when in fact their mental capacity was a matter of debate. Hope became a person in the body of ’fessor White, who looked beyond that real-world challenge because of what he believed in his heart. When you bring this habit into your workplaces, you ensure the quality of life that will drive the success of the people and the organization.

The challenge of 21st-century leadership is to embrace these habits that I saw Poppa Joe and others live out, and pass them along to those who follow—who will become leaders themselves one day. These habits are not held captive by race, gender, or geography. Brought into the workplace they become a force multiplier. When leaders intentionally and strategically slow down enough to build and sustain relationships with their people, they demonstrate to others their personal commitment. Without spending quality time, there is no reason to expect quality results.

## People Matter

Peter Drucker was right on target—people matter! In spite of everything else surrounding their lives, my elders—Poppa included—recognized my value in the equation of their own success. They needed me and I

needed them. And as I look back and examine their day-to-day actions, they also exemplified and personalized the qualities of leadership that would be required of me.

They seemed to have intuitively understood the words of Lockheed Martin’s Bob Stevens, that their behavior mattered in the process and that their people would do what they saw them doing. My elders made a point of modeling in my presence the behaviors I would later need on the job, with my family, and throughout my life. This fundamental process has not changed—leadership matters! And when leadership matters in an organization, productive followership will result. Taking the time to build community, to slow down and get to know your people, will have far-reaching and long-lasting benefits.



*Clifton L. Taulbert, a Pulitzer-nominated author and the president and founder of the Building Community Institute, speaks throughout the world on the critical issue of building community and creating an environment branded by respect, affirmation, and inclusion. He is also the author of the internationally acclaimed “Eight Habits of the Heart,” a book that provides the framework on which to build, maintain, and sustain a powerful, effective, and caring community. Visit his Web site at [www.cliftontaulbert.com](http://www.cliftontaulbert.com).*