Leadership in a Culture of Connection
By Betsy Myers

Economic issues in today’s news, with its day-to-day tracking of incremental shifts in investment by business, consumer spending, and the nation’s ongoing employment report card, can often obscure larger trends and distract attention from the deeper issues. Yet it is these broader trends and deeper issues that will most profoundly affect the life and health of our businesses well into the new century.

These issues go beyond simple numbers and speak to the quality, style, and nature of the fabric of twenty-first-century business itself.

For the past three years, while developing the content and concepts in my book, Take the Lead, I have traveled the country working with corporations of all sizes, and have gained a first-hand glimpse into the specific concerns that today’s corporations seem to be grappling with most consistently. Three common denominators I see again and again are, to put them briefly: 1) employee disengagement and the losses in productivity it creates; 2) lack of adequate gains in addressing the needs of women in the workforce; and 3) a similar lack of gains in adapting the workplace to the needs and wants of younger employees, especially those who have entered their twenties during the last decade.

One thing that has been crystal clear during these travels is that, to borrow the title of Marshall Goldsmith’s enormously popular book, what got us here won’t get us there.

From my perspective, the title of this conference could not possibly be more apt. Creating and sustaining a culture of continuous leadership development—especially one that directly fosters a new kind of leadership that nurtures meaningful personal connection at every level and deeply values a richly collaborative diversity—is exactly what the businesses of today and tomorrow need if they are to not only survive, but thrive.

Addressing an Epidemic of Disengagement

In 2004, while I was serving as Executive Director of Harvard’s Center for Public Leadership, we began publishing an annual National Leadership Index. Our first edition revealed that public confidence in the United States had seen a twenty-year decline: 66 percent of Americans felt we were mired in a leadership crisis, and nearly three-quarters (72 percent) believed that unless the country’s leaders improved, the United States would decline as a nation (Harvard 2004). In subsequent editions, the numbers have grown only worse.

This crisis in leadership has brought with it a parallel crisis in the workforce.

A recent Gallup poll showed that only 27 percent of U.S. workers were “engaged” at work, while 69 percent were either “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” (Gallup 2006). According to a 2011 survey by Right Management, a subsidiary of the job-placement firm Manpower, 84 percent of employees planned to seek a new position in 2012, and that figure was up from 60 percent in 2009. Only 5 percent—down from 13 percent just two years earlier—said they planned to stay in their current position. That’s just one in twenty (Right Management 2011).
This is a huge problem with enormous economic consequences. One study found that disengaged and disenchanted workers bring down workplace morale, fuel accelerated turnover, and take a staggering annual toll of some $350 billion in the United States, with comparable figures abroad (Athey 2004).

In fact, many organizations pour millions of dollars every year into trying to increase employee engagement. In the United States alone, according to leadership development expert Elliott Masie, we spend more than $15 billion a year on leadership development programs.

Why, then, do so many people—from 50 to 95 percent, depending on which studies you read—feel disconnected and disengaged from their workplace? Are these programs simply not working? Or is it that our leaders are focusing on the wrong things?

Addressing that question was in many ways the central focus of my book. From my observations, I believe that the answer lies in a new approach to leadership, one that places a strong value on fostering a sense of connection within the people of the business community.

Feeling connected to others is what gives our lives meaning and fuels our sense of belonging. It speaks to our desire to identify with and feel part of something bigger than ourselves, a shared goal or mission. This is why we make the effort to attend school and family reunions and root for our favorite sports teams; it is why we can become so passionately engaged in a cause we identify with or the community we live in. In the best of circumstances, it is the power source that great leaders tap into and evoke in others.

What would our world look like if all our leaders and managers were able to stir in others that sense of connection to their business, organization, or community? Wouldn’t it make sense for every organization to strive to create this feeling in its members?

For example, the Athey study mentioned above also pointed out that the quality of workplace relationships was a critical factor in the discontent: “Emerging research suggests that workplace toxicity may trump other factors when it comes to employee morale and performance. The number one reason people leave comes down to their relationship with their boss [emphasis added].”

Sometimes when people are unhappy at work, just marking time until the next weekend, holiday, or vacation, it’s because they’re in an environment where they don’t feel connected. They don’t feel they belong there, that their contribution matters, or that they are valued as part of the team. When people don’t feel connected, they disengage, tune out, or act out.

In a way, this is similar to how children feel sometimes. Why do children have tantrums? Often it’s because they’re frustrated that they don’t have a voice, that they are not being heard, understood, or included. Adults have tantrums, too, and for the same reasons; we just do it in different ways. We may shut down in a meeting, or speak up aggressively, or join in the water cooler gossip and talk about people behind their backs, or treat them badly. We call in sick or spend the day on the Internet; we drink, overeat, rage, lie, or withdraw.

It doesn’t have to be this way—not if we are willing to be conscious and recognize that engagement begins with the simple human desire to feel connected.
Hewitt Associates, a leading provider of human resources outsourcing and consulting, recently conducted a fascinating study to help understand what motivates top talent to deliver their best. They looked at seven Fortune 500 companies across a range of industries, collecting data from nearly 750 respondents. One of the most intriguing findings was that today’s high performers don’t simply want to be managed; they want to be mentored. Top athletes and artists, the studies’ authors pointed out, typically rely on individual guidance inspiration, and personal coaching to grow and develop. “It’s no different,” they add, “in the world of business” (Verma, et al., 2007).

This is more than a matter of the sheer transmission of know-how or teaching of skills. When people are mentored they feel cared about. It seems so simple — but it is a key driver to employee satisfaction and engagement in the workplace. Personal mentorship is the essence of effective leadership. Again: connection.

Honoring Women in the Workforce

One of the most intriguing results from our first annual Index was that the majority of those surveyed felt the country would be better off with more women in leadership positions. Why?

One reason surely is the increasing presence of women in the workforce: by 2010, the number of women in the U.S. labor force actually outnumbered men. Yet I believe there is another, more central reason. Women tend to bring a very different dynamic to leadership, one that is collaborative and team-centered, that thrives on connection, relationship, openness, and cooperation with those who hold different viewpoints and beliefs, a kind of leadership that does not simply direct or manage people but engages them.

There is a shift happening in the conversation among CEOs and other senior business leaders (most of them male) concerning the role of women in business. In the past few decades, the inclusion of women has often been regarded as socially important. Today it has come to be viewed a business imperative. In other words, our business leaders are realizing that promoting women to the top ranks of their businesses is not only the right thing to do—it is also the smart thing to do.

Looking ahead to their long-term corporate goals, these leaders understand that they cannot show up effectively in 2020 with a mostly white male workforce. Businesses may have found success with a heavily male management up to this point, but continued success will require far greater inclusion of diverse perspectives on boards and in C-suite positions. For most businesses, the majority of their customers are women—women account for 85 percent of all consumer purchases, from automobiles and computers to homes and health care —and it’s plain good business sense to have key decision-makers in place who can identify with the buying customer.

Despite this new awareness, though, along with the obvious gains that have been made in women’s role in the business community, there is still considerable ground to cover before we are where we need to be.

Today, although women compose more than half the workforce and receive more graduate and undergraduate degrees than men, we represent no more than 12 to 15 percent of the
board of directors memberships and C-suite jobs in corporate America. Just 5 percent of American CEOs are women, and that number drops to 2 percent—one in fifty—for Fortune 500 companies. In fact, today women are leaving the workforce and corporate America in alarming numbers because they don’t feel valued, support, included, and appreciated.

There is considerable willingness to change this—and there is also considerable evidence that doing so is indeed an economic imperative and not just good social policy. Studies show solid evidence that companies with more women in C-suite jobs are more profitable than their peers. In fact, one study found that those companies with three or more women on their boards reported a 73 percent higher average return on sales.

Our Center for Women and Business at Bentley University was conceived, as Bentley president Gloria Larson puts it, “as a force for change—addressing gender disparity from the start of any good business career, the undergraduate classroom, and continuing to address disparities all the way up to the corner suite and in the corporate board room.” As part of our work, we are helping to develop a set of best practices for corporate America concerning how they can retain, support and promote women in their senior roles and board positions.

**Embracing the Millennial Generation in Business**

There was a time when the classic command-and-control style of leadership worked, but what worked then doesn’t work now. The world has changed profoundly in the past two decades. Society has grown more diverse, and along with women and minorities, the younger generation has come to play a far more central role in business.

Over the next decade, as baby boomers retire in vast numbers, corporations will face a huge and growing challenge—actually, two challenges at the same time. First, in terms of sheer demographic numbers, there are simply not enough of the younger generation to fill the vacating positions. Second, as corporations are already discovering, keeping personnel of this younger generation engaged presents its own unique set of challenges.

Many corporations are finding that they are recruiting and spending significant dollars on the training and development of these new employees, only to see them leave in droves after only one, two, or three years on the job. Why? What’s going on that our businesses have not yet grasped and incorporated into how they do business? And most importantly, what do we need to do in order to hang on to these increasingly valuable employees?

Whatever the answers to these questions, they are not going to come from the simple math of salaries, bonuses, and benefits packages. This generation is not simply looking for employment, but a new quality of employment.

Jeffrey Arnett, the sociologist who coined the term *emerging adulthood*, says this generation is strongly motivated by wanting to find what he terms “identity-based work.” “They see work as a form of self-expression,” says Arnett, “they want it to make the most of their talents, abilities and interests.” Dan Pink, bestselling author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, cites polling that shows the millennial generation is extraordinarily purpose-driven—“much more so than the baby boomers,” he adds, “whom we mythologize as being out
to change the world, when in fact this new generation shows a far greater orientation toward purpose than their parents did.” (Networking Times, 2011)

Pollster John Zogby describes today’s emerging adults (ages from eighteen to twenty-nine) as “the first globals,” and says they are more globally aware and globally connected than any generation before them. Arnett agrees, adding, “They are more accepting of diversity and more tolerant of differences—in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth—than any previous generation.”

One thing we know for sure is that the old conversation of balance doesn’t resonate with today’s younger business leaders. For them it is about living an integrated life. Working for companies where the whole person is valued, where there is recognition that employees have lives outside of work and it is possible to do both.

Companies such as Procter & Gamble have beautifully embraced this new reality by instituting reverse mentoring programs, in which the CEO and senior leaders all work with mentors who are young people who have been with the firm less than three years. These younger-generation mentors help their older mentees understand this new generation and how they think, what motivates them and how to keep them engaged, as well as providing them with valuable and much-needed assistance in overcoming any challenges around technology.

**Leadership That Honors Our Feelings**

All three of these issues—the younger generation, women, and employee engagement overall—converge around the clear need for a new style and approach to business leadership, one that places primacy on how our actions and our leadership are making other people feel.

Advanced degrees, years of experience, an important title, or access to power do not guarantee that you will be a successful leader. Effective leadership is about how you make people feel—about you, about the project or work you’re doing together, and especially about themselves. Why? Because it is often when people feel good about themselves and what they’re doing that they also do their best work. When people feel valued, appreciated, heard, supported, acknowledged, and included, they are motivated to bring their best selves forward. This is how initiatives get launched, profits are made, and the work gets done. It’s not just about being nice, it is about being effective.

Most of us don’t think of feelings as being the key to success in leadership. It seems almost counterintuitive. But think for a moment about the times in your life when you have been most productive: were not those also the times when you felt the most valued, supported, and appreciated?

If I were to recommend a single leadership skill to any organization, public or private, large or small, it would be this: put your focus on whether your leaders are bringing out the most productive feelings of their people. How do you know? You’ll know because when they are, you’ll see an organization full of people who feel a deep sense of connection and commitment to the organization and its mission, who are willing to take the lead and go the extra mile.
And I believe it is exactly that kind of leadership culture—a leadership that stays conscious about people’s feelings—that will have a hugely positive impact on every generation of workers, young and old alike; on both the women and the men in our organizations; and on employee engagement, commitment, and productivity across the board.

References


Betsy Myers is one of the world’s foremost thinkers and speakers on the changing nature of leadership. Her book Take the Lead: Motivate, Inspire, and Bring Out the Best in Yourself and Everyone Around You was selected by Tom Peters and The Washington Post as the “best leadership book for 2011.” She served as the first Director of the White Office on Women’s Initiatives and Outreach during the Clinton Administration, Executive Director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and Chief Operating Officer for Barack Obama’s 2007–08 presidential campaign. Myers currently serves as Founding Director of The Center for Women & Business at Bentley University. She lives with her family in Massachusetts.