

# Shibboleths of Leadership

*Go beyond the drive for quick fixes and instant results.*



by Lance Secretan

THE TERM *SHIBBOLETH* is a Hebrew word which translates as “torrent of water.” In the *Bible*, the word was used to distinguish the Ephraimites—members of a group whose dialect lacked a “sh” sound, who used an “s” in its place—from the Gileadites, whose members’ dialect included such a sound.

A *shibboleth* has come to mean the use of old words or phrases that form part of the specialized jargon of a group, and reveal their users as members of a group. Since many of us continue to cling to old ideas, I coin the term *shibboleths of leadership*.

I believe the practice, theory, and teaching of leadership has been in a rut for years. I’ve noticed a herd mentality afoot. Consultants, professors, academic writers, and theorists work hard to deepen the existing paradigm, thus excluding new thinking.

Our attachment to shibboleths and theories often serve our need to be right more than the need to make the world better. This frailty of ego results in making work experience debilitating for many people whose common sense tells them that the philosophies and theories being practiced and promoted are inadequate and anachronistic. Yet, people are pulled along on the stream of fashionable shibboleths masquerading as wisdom, unable to change it all. The CEOs, leaders and HR practitioners responsible for training and development, often scan the environment for the most popular theories and books—obsolete paradigms and shibboleths—and not wanting to be seen to be out of step, they encourage the same obsolescence themselves, reinforcing the inadequacy and providing validation for those still stuck in their old paradigms.

## Nine Shibboleths

A quick review of some of the prevailing management paradigms will give us a sense of some of our most popular shibboleths of leadership.

**1. The Shibboleth of Six Sigma.** This shibboleth isn’t wrong, it simply

needs a fundamental redesign. Six Sigma ideas are essentially sound—particularly the refinement of processes, the reduction of errors, the elimination of waste and unnecessary costs. These are noble aims and benefit customers and other stakeholders. On the other hand, for many people, Six Sigma is a not-so-secret code for layoffs. The mere mention of Six Sigma strikes terror in the hearts of employees. Many tasks and processes are redundant, but few people will willingly design themselves out of a job.

The new paradigm, renamed *Soulful Six Sigma*, incorporates a guarantee that there will be no job losses as a result of streamlining work or eliminating positions. This changes the entire dynamic of Six Sigma—people will eagerly eliminate redundant jobs



as long as they feel safe about their own future employment. This adaptation of Six Sigma transforms it from a threatening and intimidating activity, complete with warlike language (like black belts) into a soulful practice aimed at improving, refining and making better every aspect of the activity—an aim from which everyone gains and no one loses.

**2. The Shibboleth of Mission, Vision, and Values.** Every organization would feel naked without the emperor’s clothing of mission, vision, and values. Many Fortune 500 leaders would consider their annual report to be inadequate if it lacked a statement of mission, vision, and values. Close inspection of mission, vision, and values statements reveals that they are all the same. Few inspire, and most people can’t even remember them.

The new thinking is that leaders need to identify their *Destiny* (Why are

we here?), follow a *Cause* (How will we be and what will we stand for?) and ensure that everyone is aligned with these—and following their *Calling* (How will I use our gifts and talents to serve?). This new paradigm replaces the old shibboleth with an entirely new set of ideas and thoughts, adding the fire and passion so many employees find missing today.

**3. The Shibboleth of Training.** The old-story paradigm urges us to train people—but training is for dogs. The best learning is always attached to coaching, not training. Coaching provides an ongoing partnership that inspires others toward fulfillment in their personal and professional lives. Think of great athletes, musicians, actors and actresses, and entertainers—they all have coaches who listen, observe, teach, and advise. Extraordinary mastery doesn’t come from a conventional classroom “chalk-and-talk” approach. Coaching is the new paradigm. Training without coaching is entertainment. But training remains a favorite. Meanwhile, when times get tough, the first thing that gets ejected from the budget, along with the bathwater, is the training baby—a clear signal that the real value attached to training by most leaders is marginal.

**4. The Shibboleth of Psychological Testing.** The old shibboleth focuses greatly on psychometrics—the science of measuring “psychological” aspects of a person such as knowledge, emotions, cognitive skills, propensities, relating abilities—or personality. The belief is that if we can better understand the personalities of others, we can manage them better. Typically, this is about understanding (for one’s own gain) the workings of other people’s egos and motives. Such manipulation can create fear and lead to materialism, selfishness, and superficiality.

What people yearn for today is something different—a connection to the spirit. Focusing on a different aspect of the human condition—our spiritual condition—and abandoning our fixation with unraveling the mystery of the personality will lead to enhanced human relationships. Organizations grow because of the spiritual relationships among people. Unless we focus on spiritual development and growth and appreciate the difference between spiritual development and personality development, we will be stuck with a primitive format that does not allow for the evolution of the spirit and true greatness.

## Top Challenges

*Leaders confront trends.*



by Ken Blanchard

FOR THE PAST FIVE years, we have conducted an annual survey of HR managers and corporate leaders to pinpoint their top concerns. This year, respondents indicate that their most pressing issues include:

- Increased competition as old competitors evolve and new ones appear
- Growth and expansion while facing a lack of skilled labor and the need to attract and retain good people and to develop them to their fullest potential
- The need to shore up internal leadership and management bench strength and retain top leadership talent
- Balancing internal concerns with servicing and satisfying customers.

Increased competition affects the ability of leaders to attract and retain good people. It also creates a climate where customers form a “commodity” mind-set. This drives price sensitivity and the need to differentiate products, services, and offerings to capitalize on the organization’s value proposition.

Leaders cite the need to grow with a strategic focus along with increasing efficiency, streamlining functions, and providing quality products and services.

Respondents place leadership development, selecting and retaining key talent, creating an engaged workforce, and managerial skills as critical areas of focus. They believe that competitive advantage hinges on good leadership, stating that leadership drives improvement in all other areas.

A shrinking labor pool contributes to the high cost of recruiting talented people—in both line and leadership positions. So the top management challenges this year include developing potential leaders, creating an engaged workforce, selecting and retaining key talent, developing managerial skills, customer relationship skills, information technology, and sales skills.

Looking ahead, respondents see the need to focus on selection and retention of key talent, succession planning, and increasing innovation. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Identify your top challenges.

**5. The Shibboleth of Metrics.** The old shibboleth develops techniques and processes to create metrics for every aspect of the business. The old adage is “what gets measured gets done” and “if it can’t be measured, it doesn’t exist”—a sort of Cartesian view of leadership. Of course, instinctively, we all know this not to be true. There are many things that we can’t measure, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. Sunsets, falling in love, or even remarkable customer service are hard to measure, but they are very real. Metrics are important, but our extreme focus on metrics is overdone. If we would ease up on our left-brain preoccupation with metrics, and practice being of service to others, rather than theorizing about it, we would accomplish great metrics. Starbucks, Southwest, and W. L. Gore understand this and work to serve the inner needs of customers, employees, societies, and communities. As a result, they achieve remarkable metrics.



**6. The Shibboleth of Diversity and Ethics Programs.** Diversity and ethics training are often part of the leadership curriculum and HR policy. This is much like discovering that you have a headache and mandating the consumption of aspirin. It doesn’t solve the problem, but it looks like you’re doing something productive. The cause of the headache—the failure to respect and honor the differences in other people—is at the heart of a lack of diversity appreciation.

The deeper paradigm is about honoring the sacredness in everyone. If we did so, then customer service programs, quality programs, diversity training, health and safety training, and other training programs would no longer be required—we would simply do what has to be done to honor the sacredness of others—employees, customers, and suppliers alike. This paradigm would reveal the superficiality of mandated training programs.

**7. The Shibboleth of Strategy.** If strategy means knowing where you are going and having a plan for getting there, it can be useful. On the other hand, we need to leave room for intuition. Some things “feel right.” No strategic plan will tell us how that works—but it will often tell us to ignore intuiting in favor of strategy. Often we follow a strategic plan well past the point where our intuition tells us that it no longer works. Intuition is how most

buying decisions are made. Obviously, the other side of that equation—how most selling decisions get made—should be matched to the intuitive nature of the transaction. Most human activity is intuitive, and intuition can be aroused in most of us where it is sleeping and taught to the rest of us where it is absent. Nourishing and honoring our intuition is just as valuable in inspiring high performance as the application of strategic management.

**8. The Shibboleth of Teambuilding.** Often, I observe that leaders are too wary and afraid, or emotionally frail or tender, to address the real issues needed to build a great team—issues such as truth-telling, trust, love, compassion, respect, mutual support, inspiration, mastery, and sacredness. And so, someone implements another flavor-of-the-month program, stuffed with shibboleths. The very notion of teambuilding is a shibboleth because great teams are a

result, not a program. If we are mature enough to learn how to tell the truth to each other, behave in ways which, over time, create and build mutual trust, where we genuinely care for each other and support, inspire, and help each other to grow, learn together to achieve collective and individual mastery—then, and only then, will we create the result we are looking for—a great team.

**9. The Shibboleth of Research.** All research is flawed. Thirty percent of new products fail at launch, and 60 percent are never accepted by consumers and soon disappear, despite being birthed out of sophisticated research. This is because we are tapping into the conscious mind. But new techniques are emerging that fly below the radar of the conscious mind, and our ability to manipulate data. We need to be informed, but correctly informed.

Perhaps, our demand for quick fixes and instant results, and the demand to generate sterling financial results every quarter has turned us into Pavlovian leaders, looking for the bell that will cause our people to salivate—now.

Leaders need courage to throw out the shibboleths. Wisdom and greatness take patience and time—like fine wine, gardening, great art, and culture. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Facilitate fresh thinking.