

by Jim Kim, President at The World Bank

Best Advice: Learn to Listen to Your Team

Ever since I was a boy and played on sports teams, I've been fascinated by the challenge of leadership. How can you inspire or guide groups of people to success – sometimes to heights that they never dreamed of reaching as individuals?

I thought about this a lot as a senior in high school in Muscatine, Iowa, where I was a quarterback for my team, the Muskies. We were in the midst of a long losing streak. And I mean long. As in years. In fact, it would eventually become the longest losing streak in the nation at the time -- 56 games in all.

We just weren't very good; but I felt, as quarterback, that I should take some responsibility for the team's performance. Our mounting losses only deepened my need to know what it takes to become an effective leader.

Years later – too late for the Muskies – I received some great advice from Marshall Goldsmith, one of the preeminent authorities in the field of leadership. He told me this: "If you want to be an effective leader, listen to and accept with humility the feedback that comes from your team."

I've spent years in academia, and for many scholars, the whole notion of leadership is often problematic. Professors usually argue – and I really do mean argue -- that a key tenet of higher education is to train people not to follow others, to think independently, and to question authority. Some would equate notions of leadership with coercion, and an unhealthy, perhaps even dangerous approach to human social life.

But what I've come to learn in my career – starting with tackling complex health problems around the world, during my time at the helm of Dartmouth College, and now leading the World Bank Group -- is that while everyone acknowledges that leadership is important, few put in the time and effort it takes to become a more effective leader.

Creating a sense of shared purpose within often very diverse groups can be extraordinarily difficult, but when it happens, even large, unruly groups can tackle just about anything. That sounds simple, but it's not easy.

So how do we become better leaders?

An important starting point is to understand how people respond to you. There is great consensus in the field of leadership that the classic 360-degree review, in which those who work directly with a leader give honest and anonymous feedback on that person's performance, is an essential tool.

For anyone who has been through a 360 review, as I have, the results can be humbling,

sometimes even devastating. After reading some of the reviews of my performance, I found myself saying, “They weren’t supposed to see that.” I knew that I had a lot of work ahead of me to become a better leader.

So how should you react to this kind of feedback? That gets us back to Marshall’s advice: The most fundamental commitment you have to make as a leader is to humbly listen to the input of others, take it seriously, and work to improve. Again, it sounds simple, but it’s not easy.

Leadership, as Marshall always says, is a contact sport, and one has to constantly ask for and respond to advice from colleagues so you can improve. That leads me to one other piece of advice, which I received from Alan Mulally, Ford’s legendary CEO. He said the most important thing to remember is that on the most fundamental level, leadership is about service to others.

I was struck that Alan’s counsel was one of utmost simplicity: Serve, listen, humbly ask for advice, and improve. He also said one other thing might help along the way: Smile. Perhaps I should have smiled more at my undersized linemen when I played for the Muskies. At least I should have listened to them. The results couldn’t have been any worse.