



## Drowning in leadership advice? Here's a lifeline

By Larry Robertson

It's sad, but true: Most leadership advice fails to hit its mark. There are many reasons. Two stand out — one obvious, one less. One: today, there is an excess of information to absorb. Two, and unfortunately: we humans have very short attention spans to dedicate to absorbing it all. While you likely believe the first point, research suggests you shouldn't discount the second — including research about goldfish.

Goldfish, scientists tell us, have an average attention span of nine seconds. It's a paltry length of time, and a fact you may care little about, until you hear that humans today have an even shorter average attention span. And it's not improving. When clocked in 2000, our average attention span was 12 seconds. After a screen-addicted, volatile and frantically uncertain decade and a half, by 2015 researchers say we'd fallen to eight measly, worse-than-a-goldfish seconds before our minds race off to something else.

Before you get discouraged, here's something else that's true about us: We humans thrive on novelty. That's good news, because when it comes to making leadership advice work, most leaders would agree we're ready for something new. To improve your leadership effectiveness, consider something I'll call "a mantra a day."

Here's the idea: Instead of asking yourself to navigate and absorb all of that leadership advice out there all at once, choose to focus on a single insight per day. Go further: Whatever insight you choose, reduce it to its core and to a simple mantra-like phrase, one you can hold in your eight-seconds-of-attention head all day long and use like a compass, like a litmus test. Most important of all, choose a proven insight. I'll offer you five, one per work day, but not just any five insights. What follows are five insights that in my research for my book "Rebel Leadership" consistently

surfaced across the most resilient, value-creating and successful organizations as most critical.

### 1. Soul matters most

Like any good mantra, this one is sparse on words, but deep in value and impact. This kind of soul has three key parts. Soul is having a sense of 1) who you are, 2) in the context of what you do and 3) how what you do impacts and connects to others. Three parts: Not one, not separate, but all three together. Because when you put these three parts together, you at once ask and answer who the person doing the leading (you), what your function is, and why anyone, including you should care to team with you. Soul really does matter most. All else is supportive. It's a great first mantra to wrap your head around.

### 2. Leadership moves

The days you contemplate this mantra are the days you acknowledge that your true source of strength as a leader comes not from you, but from others. You may think of those others as followers, but they're at their best when you enable them to also become leaders. This is your honesty mantra, when you look around and truthfully embrace how work gets done. Everyone leads, at least in organizations that thrive. Your job as the senior leader is to create the environment in which they can.

### 3. It's the culture

All leaders claim that culture is important. Claim. But to make culture go from concept to competitive advantage, you have to actually know what it is. On your culture mantra days, consider how Melissa Thomas-Hunt, global head of diversity and belonging at Airbnb, defined culture when I interviewed her. "Culture comes from the way people behave, how they engage, what things they give currency to, the markers of the language they use and hear, what's sanctioned in all of that, and what's taboo. The things we value — actually value — anchor what culture is, not just

what we say it is, but the behaviors that reveal what we value. You can claim culture, but unless it trickles down to the smallest parts, every one of them, it means little.” If that doesn’t sound like culture as you know it in your organization, this might become your most important mantra day.

#### 4. Know your power source — and know it's a superpower

There’s something deeper than your business plan, your strategy, your mission that truly drives your organization and its chances of success. If you know that something, if you channel your actions from it, you can dramatically increase your odds of success. If you don’t, you’re at greater risk than you think.

To get to that something, what I call your “power source,” Peter Drucker used to ask a single question: What business are we in? Powerfully, Drucker would ask it not once, but five times, seeking an answer five layers deep, well beneath the obvious. At that level, Drucker believed you could reach the core, the true power undergirding an organization. If you knew that power source and pursued it, Drucker preached, you could make it a true superpower. The chance to tap a hidden superpower seems worthy of your attention at least once a week.

#### 5. Tomorrow in today

In *Rebel Leadership*, I explored this idea saying, “the long view matters — right now.” The idea has two parts. Most leaders are too easily consumed by the fires-or-the-day. As a result, those missions and purposes leaders aspire to simply get lost or get lip service. So, whenever “tomorrow in today” is your mantra, look around. See what’s happening today that directly reflects tomorrow, or what could. Today, consider if everyone is even clear about tomorrow’s goal and meaning. Then empowering them to make both real.

Traditionally, mantras are considered a tool to transform, to turn noise into clarity, to bring focus. In a world bursting with leadership advice and scant leadership effectiveness, it may be the very thing you've been lacking.

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