

BE A TREE

In order to lead well, you must first grow yourself, as any meaningful and lasting change begins within you.

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“Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.”

– JACK WELCH, AMERICAN BUSINESS EXECUTIVE AND
FORMER GENERAL ELECTRIC CHAIRMAN AND CEO

Let's go over some of the challenges and hurdles starting leaders in the face in 2024 (and possibly beyond):

- Rapidly changing consumer wants and needs (client families are a consumer subset) ✓
- Consumer demand for more convenience and greater transparency and use of technology ✓
- Finding and retaining qualified talent and staff is increasingly more difficult ✓
- Funeral home environments becoming more multigenerational among staff ✓
- It's an inflationary environment in which not only money/cost of capital but everything else is more expensive. ✓

There is plethora more, but these are some of the issues facing leadership in the funeral profession that immediately come to mind.

Why did we select the quote from a long-retired GE executive who passed away in 2020 as being most appropriate for me to deliver my message to the next generation of leaders in this profession? Because while tastes may change and the pendulum of time may slowly swing back and forth over the passing of eras and epochs, the basics of what is good knowledge, fundamental wisdom and human nature are still timeless.

There are two underlying corollary truths that require some reading between the lines within the Jack Welch quote. The first is that any meaningful and lasting change begins within yourself to become the leader you need to be, and second is the realization that your success is (and always has been) largely defined by the successes of those around you.

We'll focus here on the first part of the quote – becoming the leader you need to be – while introducing a “new” concept and practice that has largely

been employed by those with a computer science background – semantic tree learning. The concept is simple but is oftentimes more difficult in practice: If knowledge as a whole is represented as being a tree, learning and mastering the basics first (the “trunk”) allows you to more quickly learn and master the details (the “branches”) thereafter.

The semantic tree, as it pertains to learning, may be broken down into the following:

1. THE TRUNK

This is where most of your time should be spent reading and learning. Old books, histories and biographies are typically sources where a knowledge or wisdom seeker would gain fundamental principles and core concepts on any given subject. The belief is that true, timeless wisdom resides and can be gained here.

2. THE BRANCHES

Once you have a deep understanding of core concepts and fundamental principles, your knowledge seeking begins to branch out toward exploring and learning about related major themes and ideas that have grown from the fundamental trunk of the tree. These might include newer books, publications and periodicals.

3. THE LEAVES

Rarely are these beneficial as they represent news and noise. You may come to these for some peripheral perspective but if and only if you have already established a strong fundamental trunk and solid branching of knowledge. Or, you may avoid the leaves altogether.

This discipline of learning can also be applied to leadership, as in learning and knowing the basics of oneself – the way you think, your belief system, your habits and inclinations, your strengths and weaknesses – before you begin learning how to grow and fortify others (branches), as well as deal with other details and situations (leaves), such as how you would act in leading others in a particular scenario or how you would go about solving a problem or issue you may not have faced before.

The emphasis is not just in learning the basics about who you are as a leader but also in how you master yourself as a leader. In application, the semantic tree method helps you to focus on and master the foundation of your leadership first, before you can begin to successfully develop others (or “grow the branches”). The logic can best be summed up with the expression that you cannot build a strong house on a shaky foundation.

So how do you apply the semantic tree in learning and mastering yourself and your core leadership? First, it takes some dedication to self-awareness and

reflection, not to mention honesty with yourself. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? Do you have blind spots in how you view yourself? How you view others? View the world? Do you listen to others, or do you think you know it all? Reflecting honestly on what you have learned in life and the mistakes (which most certainly lead to the best learning opportunities) you’ve made will certainly help in developing self-awareness.

Becoming more self-aware is a fundamental building block in creating a strong trunk because it allows you to anticipate and identify possible blind spots in future scenarios. For example, many people share a very common blind spot – they are unaware they use “uhs” and “ums” or the frequently used “like” when they are speaking. As for an example of leadership blind spots, there are managers who might become visibly irritated and short with their communication to the team when faced with an issue or problem they may never have ever dealt with before. In both examples, you cannot begin to address the blind spots if you’re not aware of them.

Wonderful! You are now better at self-awareness. What’s next? The next phase involves “hijacking” your normal or old way of thinking and applying a new perspective and way of thinking with your new self-awareness.

Thought is a powerful force, and the human brain predominantly “thinks” in images. Remember way, way back to when you were first learning about words and spelling; there is a reason why picture books that associate a picture of a cat with how “cat” is spelled work so effectively with formative learning. But it’s not reserved just for formative learning. Brain function works similarly when you are an adult. This has been the basis for so many of the foreign language learning courses and tools such as Rosetta Stone or Babbel – by associating a picture of a man with the word “hombre” or a picture of a woman with the word “mujer.”

Therefore, hijacking your old way of thinking and replacing it with pictures and images of positive or ideal outcomes will begin to “rewire” and recondition your brain. This “plasticity,” which we all naturally have within our brains and which allows for the change of thinking toward outcomes and objectives you want to achieve, is another fundamental building block of a strong semantic trunk.

From the example above about a manager losing their composure with the team when faced with a novel problem or issue, replacing that old image with the picture of a manager maintaining their composure in light of the problem is the goal you should be working toward. But like anything else in life, it takes dedication, focus and practice.

In turn, beginning to think differently will also cause you to refine your beliefs. A refined, fundamentally strong belief system will lead to your actions to change and evolve. And finally, when your changed actions have consistently been established, you now have improved your leadership behavior and therefore you've actively worked to focus and master yourself and your leadership skills as the foundational "trunk" of the semantic tree. After all, you cannot grow what you cannot connect.

What we have just laid out is a very high-level synopsis and methodology of leadership mindset that has been pioneered by The Pacific Institute since 1971. Regardless of what leadership school of thought or discipline you decide may work best for you, applying the semantic tree learning concept and approach will establish that you are the trunk of your semantic tree who must self-grow and self-master first. You will be able to more quickly develop others, grow the branches of your leadership tree and better deal with overcoming any pending problems (staffing issues, changing consumer tastes and wants, in-

flation, etc.) when you are fundamentally strong as a positive, forward-thinking leader.

And thus, the quote beginning this article by an iconic and successful executive from the past, ties itself seamlessly to the very "next generation" concept of semantic tree learning as applied to leadership. While discussing such concepts as semantic tree learning may seem linear – meaning there is some clear-cut beginning and end – we tend to think that this process of immersing yourself in developing yourself first before developing others as more of a circular process, or like a wheel. And remember that all lasting and meaningful change begins from within yourself before you can positively impact those around you. ☰

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