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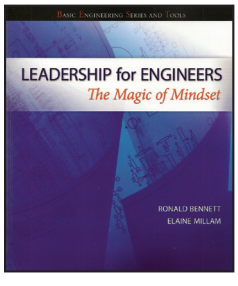
ViewPoints

Our Ethical Obligation to Lead

When I entered the workforce after graduating in metallurgical engineering, I went to work for BMC Industries. I was hired into R&D, and planned to happily work alone in the lab on various projects. Being technically oriented, working with other people didn't interest me much, and I enjoyed doing things myself. If someone needed my help, I figured, they'd seek me out. I wouldn't volunteer if I saw something that needed doing if it wasn't my job.

It didn't take long to get pulled into a production issue, however. BMC had a subsidiary that did heat treating, and they were in trouble. A senior metallurgist, Vic, and I were sent to investigate. As we flew to Chicago, I was reading up on dissociated ammonia atmospheres. Vic asked what I was doing: I said I wasn't very familiar with this process, and was refreshing my memory. He laughed and said, 'the technical problems will get solved; it's the people problems that will bite us.' It took two years, but I found he was right. We found the maintenance supervisor, Charlie, cranking the controls to throw the process out of whack. Why? So he could be the hero and solve the problem.



A couple years later, in a meeting with the president of the company, I suggested a refinement to an electroforming process. He said, 'great idea!' I felt really good. Then he said, 'now go sell it.' I thought 'sell what? Isn't it obvious – even the president recognized that? And to whom would I 'sell it'? And what does it mean to 'sell'? I was confused. I thought my technical ideas would stand on their own.

After many years in industry, hiring and working with many technicians, engineers and scientists, the message finally sank in. I had to reach out, engage others, communicate clearly and most of all, listen. Everyone has good ideas and can be innovative—if they are allowed to be.

The toughest part of the process was this: I realized that I had to learn about myself before I could lead others. It's difficult to examine your own beliefs, find your strengths and, worst of all, your weaknesses. But once you do, you are much better prepared to understand your co-workers and to relate to them in productive ways. In fact, there are a lot of benefits: getting to know and appreciate others diversity of skills, expanding your ability to get results through others, and making work fun.

After decades of working in industry, I started teaching graduate students. Most were in manufacturing, were working adults with backgrounds as technicians, engineers, scientists and operations personnel. I came to realize through the industry and academic experience that I was not alone in realizing what it meant to lead. We began a course in leadership. At first, students resisted learning about themselves. But, after they did, they emerged as much happier, more confident and courageous people. To a person, everyone found value in the process of learning about themselves. And they learned that the so-called 'soft skills' are actually the hardest skills to learn.

My colleague, Elaine Millam, and I wanted to help an audience broader than the few hundred students we could reach in our classes. It took us years to learn the lessons of leadership. We wanted to help others shorten the time and not head down as many dead ends. So we wrote a book, *Leadership for Engineers: The Magic of Mindset* to serve as a 'handbook' for others interested in broadening their horizons, building confidence in themselves and developing the courage to be innovative.

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We also came to believe that, as stated in the 'Oath of the Engineer', it is an ethical obligation for technically educated people to conserve nature's resources and serve the public good. It's also good business. We need everyone, especially in manufacturing, to lead innovation, develop everyone's skills and creativity, to regain the manufacturing competitive advantage we have traditionally enjoyed.

So whether you read our book or seek out other resources, make an investment today in learning about yourself and begin the journey to discovering the leader within. Sure, it will be tough at first to look critically at yourself, but it will provide huge dividends not only for your professional career, but in your family and community activities as well. **ME**