



How Changing Your Lenses Will Strengthen Your Leadership

Here are six ways to shift your perspective – and lead more effectively.

By Prasad Kaipa & Navi Radjou

Your leadership perspective is based on the sum total of the knowledge, experiences, and choices you’ve made before. That perspective defines you, shaping your thoughts, decisions, and actions. It represents the way you see yourself and the situations that arise, how you judge the relative importance of things, and how you establish a meaningful relationship with others and everything around you.

Some leaders are focused on narrow, short-term goals, deepening their depth of knowledge in their domain of interest (we call these “blue” leaders). At the other end of the range are “red” leaders, guided by long-term visions that help them differentiate patterns and make strategic plans.

Most leaders favor either a blue or red type of leadership (see “Red Leader Or Blue – Which Are You?” on page 13 to see where you are on the spectrum). Both viewpoints have value. But, taken alone, each is limiting.

The problem: It’s not easy for smart leaders to shift their perspective, because it’s all they know. Sometimes, to get out of their comfort zone and evolve to the next level, they need to do something counterintuitive: They need to take off their “smart glasses.”

When they remove those lenses, smart leaders can gain a broader perspective. By changing their “smart” perspective and cultivating practical wisdom, they can lay the foundation for a wise leadership style that’s more effective.

“Lay the foundation for a wise leadership style.”

What’s a wise leader perspective? Wise leaders continually reframe and reinterpret events. They find new meanings within a rapidly changing context. Rather than relying on either a short, focused view or a broad, overarching one, they integrate both into a constantly shifting “bi-focal” way of seeing. They develop a flexible and resilient mindset that makes them act and lead with wisdom – and become more influential leaders.

To move from a smart to a wise leader perspective, start by seeing the world differently. Here are six ways to do it.

1. Become aware of your limitations, and transcend them.

One organization held a workshop called Dialogue in the Dark, led by visually impaired trainers. They conducted the entire workshop in total darkness. The goal of this experiential learning program was to shift leaders’ perspectives by making them aware of their limitations, while increasing empathy for others. **What’s your biggest limitation? How did you come to have it? How might you transcend it?**

2. Learn from desperation.

High desperation can spark epiphanies, so pay attention to what your next crisis has to teach you about perspective. While in a WWII German concentration camp, Victor Frankl realized one day that although the Nazis could torture his body, they had zero control over his mind or spirit. This empowering shift in perspective helped him survive and then to inspire his fellow prisoners to take control of their own mindsets. **What fear are you running from? How can you pay attention to it so that you can walk to the other side of desperation and discover something very new?**

3. Act on inspiration from talks or books.

The CEO of a well-known tech firm attended a talk on service-oriented organizations. He was so inspired that he acted completely out of character and drove straight to the hospital to spend four hours at the bedside of his 80-year-old neighbor.

Do you always have a new book or talk on your to-do list? Do you act on what you learn?


4. Take an extreme turn – out of your comfort zone.

Getting outside your comfort zone is a quick way to experience leadership from a new perspective. In early 2000, while awaiting the court decision in the antitrust lawsuit against Microsoft, Bill Gates decided to step down as chief executive and focus on his passion for software. This jolted his perspective, and that same year, Gates and his wife established the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, taking his leadership in an important new direction. **Are you holding on to an old and unworkable mindset? What extreme step can you take to experience and lead differently?**

5. Ditch your old glasses and look through fresh eyes.

Sometimes, shifting your perspective is as simple as really *seeing* what's there. That often means letting go of an old focus so that you can concentrate on something else that's right in front on you. **What do you need to “unlearn” and let go of? What might you focus on instead?**

6. Pursue unlikely connections and look for odd juxtapositions.

Ophthalmologist Dr. Venkataswamy created a revolutionary approach to curing blindness in India by studying McDonald's. He used the McDonald's idea of a high-efficiency, standardized, repeatable model to organize patients in operating rooms. He broke the procedure down into a series of discrete processes so that nurses and doctors could quickly move from one patient to the next. His company, Aravind, is now the largest eye care provider in the world. **What unlikely metaphors and connections can help you come up with an innovative mental model for your work?** 

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Red Leader Or Blue – Which Are You?

Do you tend to view your leadership role through blue or red glasses? Assess yourself.

IF YOU'RE A BLUE ZONE LEADER:

You value groundedness and concrete outcomes.

You focus on learning all you can about one area of expertise and becoming as competent as possible in that area.

Getting results is your goal.

You aim for high efficiency and productivity.

You like to concentrate on the “what” and “how” of your role without worrying about the “why.”

You're comfortable with details.

You're prudent and prefer safe bets to risk-taking when considering new projects.

IF YOU'RE A RED ZONE LEADER:

You tend to have a visionary, long-term, big-picture perspective.

You're strategic in your approach.

You're drawn to entrepreneurial growth opportunities.

You relish high-stakes projects.

You're driven by the desire to do bigger and better things.

You tend to be dynamic, proactive, and even aggressive in search of growth.

You're opportunistic and dissatisfied with the status quo.

Whichever one of these zones you favor, be aware of your tendency. That way, it will be easier for you to set it aside when necessary and step into the opposite zone.

Each zone has its limitations as well as its strengths. To be a wise leader, you need to move from one zone to the other – and all the permutations in between – as the situation suggests.

Take off your red or blue glasses, and widen your view to include the whole spectrum of leadership potential. Once you understand that each role is just that – a role – you can be fully engaged in any one of them and then step out of it with ease.

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Seven Ways to Be Unreasonable (Vol. 20, No. 5)

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No Need to Work on EQ (Vol. 23, No. 5)

Six Ways to Get Out of a Rut (Vol. 24, No. 4)

Leaders as Midwives Who Birth a New World (Vol. 28, No. 5)