

# Leadership Lab<sup>(R)</sup>

Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome.



Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.

Mother Teresa

Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.

Vincent van Gogh

In the end, all it takes is one small action, by one person. One at a time.

Susan Cooper

Small deeds done are better than great deeds planned.

Anonymous

## Idea in Brief

The concept of the Butterfly Effect in Chaos theory is that seemingly small actions can translate to significant impacts. These small actions may not be evident to have the effect that they do, but the result is incongruent with the input. As leaders, we must understand this implication so as not to discount the small actions that we can take to be kind or to recognize the work of others. In fact, we should search for the opportunities to create a culture where people feel valued, respected and appreciated for the work that they do.

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## The Butterfly Effect

By B.L. Janke

In Chaos Theory, the essence of the Butterfly Effect is that small changes or causes can have significant effects on the outcome of the system and especially so for non-linear systems. And while the Butterfly Effect impact was initially noted in the forecasting of weather events and highlighted when Edward Lorenz famously asked during a scientific conference: "Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?" it has application and implications well beyond merely weather forecasting.

As leaders, the most complex non-linear system we deal with daily is with people. This work is often the most rewarding and the most frustrating work that we do every day. We have all seen how the same approach does not work when dealing with two different people, and how the same approach doesn't even work with the same person on two different days. With such variability in how the "system" behaves and acts, how is a leader to navigate this complexity? The short answer is through two key behaviours: 1) consistency, and 2) not underestimating the seemingly small things for the impact that they might have.

Leadership and management training and literature have been relatively exhaustive in the importance of leadership consistency. It is not only about treating people consistently (i.e. but not the same) but also how you problem solve, react to news and the discipline you exhibit in your daily work. Most leaders understand the need for consistency in their style, mannerisms and approach to their work. The team needs to be able to predict your responses as this creates trust and safety within the group and the organization.

However, far too often, leaders don't value the effects of the small things that they do or could do that would provide a seemingly disparate impact or response. Many leaders intuitively understand the impact of the more significant events, milestones and achievements in a person's life and often take time to recognize and appreciate these. It could be a wedding, the birth of a child, or the passing of a loved one. Leaders tend to "get" the big events, but may overlook the impact that the seemingly small actions they take may have on their team and their organization.

## ***Find the serenity you need...***



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Excellence is an attitude that one must cultivate and support its growth. To do so, one must study excellence and be committed to life-long learning.

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For example, we had all read about and heard the famous story of when President John F. Kennedy visited NASA in 1962. Where, while walking down a nearly empty corridor, President Kennedy happens upon a custodian polishing the floor. President Kennedy, after a few pleasantries, asks the custodian what his job is here at NASA, and without missing a beat, the custodian answered, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon." And while this story is often told about the power of purpose and the alignment of the efforts of every team member to accomplish a challenging and difficult goal, it is also about the impact of seemingly small actions. Kennedy was the President of the United States. He did not need to stop and talk to this janitor, nor did he need to engage in the conversation that he did. By inspection, JFK could tell what

the worker's job was, but he asked anyway. He participated in a meaningful discussion that likely lasted less than two minutes, but the impact far exceeded the investment of time and energy. There is no doubt that this meeting and conversation had powerful implications for the janitor, but it also reverberated throughout all of NASA. And the story is still told today as a means to convey the power of alignment to mission or goal of the organization and the importance of everyone's contribution.

Leaders and executives tell other stories throughout organizations that speak to this point regularly. And the one that surprises many of these leaders is the impact that written thank you notes has on morale and a team member's well being. The story often follows a typical theme in which

the executive is surprised when they find out about the impact that their handwritten thank notes have on their team members. To the executive, this action is often something they have done for a long time and don't think much. They are not doing it for any other motive other than to say thank you or to recognize the efforts of others. This action is an unknown butterfly moment for the executive. But then the executive comes to realize the impact that these notes have on the team members that receive them and how they are cherished and prized. It may only take 2 -3 minutes for the executive to write the note and then drop it off at the team member's desk or have their assistant pop it in the internal mail, but orders of magnitude reverberate the impact. I have seen and heard stories about how the employees take these notes home to show to their

spouses and families and post them on the walls in their office. Some even have had them framed. The impact of these small acts is almost immeasurable.

Lot's has been written about the power of recognition and the importance of moments in people's lives. As leaders, this is something that we do need to look to create more of in our organizations, and the good news of the Butterfly Effect is that it doesn't need to be, splashy or expensive. It does, however, need to be authentic, timely, and honest. A clear case for this comes from a straightforward statistic that I came across a few years ago, which said 80% of all managers believe that they do recognition well in their teams and their organizations. Still, when the group was polled, only 20% agreed with their manager. This performance gap means that regardless of how well we think we may be at recognizing people, their contributions, and the crucial moments in their lives, we can do so much more (i.e. at least 5X more according to the data).

The cultural implication, impact, and opportunity of the Butterfly Effect at work is immense. And while it is not suggested that the existing recognition programs in your organization be discontinued in favour of the search for the low-cost Butterfly Effect opportunities. It is recommended that these small everyday opportunities be more fully leveraged. These smaller recognition opportunities need to be supported, encouraged and incorporated into the suite of tools and be accretive to the

existing corporate-sponsored programs. And that leaders look to build a plethora of circumstances and options to experiment with the smaller opportunities. The culture of an organization is not defined by the large annual programs that rolled out and managed from the corporate centre (while these are important too), but the culture is sum total of what happens on the ground on a daily basis. Sending birthday cards to your team members on their birthdays, and thank you notes on this morning's presentation, for example, has a more significant impact on the organization's culture than the annual compensation cycle, even if it is done well.

Too often, organization leaders believe that they can mandate a specific culture in their organization and do so without doing the daily work to build it themselves. You cannot command the people in the organization to behave in a certain way when you continue to act like the new "rules" don't apply to you. You cannot ask for a cultural change and then not do anything different yourself to make it come alive on a day to day basis. And you cannot punish people for failing when they try something new. Culture is the sum-total of all the behaviours that the leaders exhibit daily. It is what they do and say, not what is written in the Values, Mission and Vision statement hanging on the wall. All organizations take on the values, attitudes and behaviours of its leaders; this is what is meant by the cliché "tone at the top." The top of the organization (i.e. it's leaders) cannot merely state what the expected behaviours are; they must also model them. Nothing has a more significant impact

on the evolution of the corporate culture than the actions and activities of its leaders. Similarly, the seemingly small steps that leaders take every day to recognize their team members, to thank them for their contributions, adds up to a more significant cultural shift than any policy document that ever could be written. As does catching team members "doing things right" and reinforcing these positive behaviours

Even though there is a disparate response from the Butterfly Effect inputs, there is uncertainty about what the effect really will be from a given input. There may be some trial and error approach that is needed to discover what works, and knowing what works for one person or group of people doesn't guarantee that the same method will work with another person or group. The advice for leaders is that given the small input required on your behalf is to experiment and try many different tools and approaches to recognize, commend, appreciate and positively impact the members of your team. Build a comprehensive tool-chest of methods and not merely rely on one or two tools to do all the "work."

So what are some of these "small" ways that you can get involved that can potentially result in the Butterfly Effect with your team:

- Younger and newer employees have a lot of "firsts" that they experience at your company and for which more experienced people may not even think about it anymore. But make sure that you take the time to call these out and

leverage the power of these moments for your younger and less experienced team members. This milestone could be their first day on the job, being selected onto their first project team, the first presentation to their leader, first offsite, first time attending their boss's staff meeting, first performance feedback discussion.

- Send handwritten thank-you notes regularly. Set a number target for each week to challenge yourself to continue to do it. Make sure it is still meaningful and authentic, but force yourself to look for the opportunity to recognize someone.
- Use social media, internal or external, to provide shout-outs to individuals or teams for a job well done, or celebrating milestones.
- Walk around the office, production floor, or field and say hi to people and shake their hands. Thank them for their contributions.
- Send birthday cards to your team members on their birthdays. Make sure you sign them yourself (i.e. don't use an autopen or an assistant).
- Be the greeter at company events like the annual holiday party, children's events or picnics. Meet your team member's spouse, parents, children as they come through. Engage in some conversation where ever you can.
- Introduce your spouse and children to others when together at social events with your team members. Please don't assume that they may have already met before. It's better to introduce people that already know each other and have a slight moment of

awkwardness when doing so than assume they do know each other when they have never met and had your employee walk away feeling unimportant and irrelevant.

- Share articles and books that you are reading with members on your team.
- Send handwritten congratulatory notes on the hard copy print out of the company-wide transfer announcement of a team member's move.
- Send a note congratulating people on their promotions.
- When you become aware of a significant accomplishment in someone's personal life (e.g. wedding, the birth of a child, vacation, completing a marathon), include this in your next conversation with the person or send them a note highlighting the accomplishment.
- Become familiar with the names and activities of your team member's spouse and kids. Ask about them regularly. Make sure you are sincerely curious and interested. This is not something to be insincere about.
- Say "please" and "thank you", a lot.
- At the next offsite meeting that you plan with your team, stand at the door and greet everyone as they arrive. If your attendees have travelled to be there, thank them for making the trip.
- Recognize the efforts of the organizing committee for your latest offsite during the offsite.
- At your regular offsite meetings, include a section in which pictures of team members at work are

included so that you can highlight particular accomplishments and the list of things the team has gotten done in the intervening period.

The list of things that you can do is limited only by the imagination. Being authentic and sincere is vital as most people can spot disingenuous recognition and insincerity a mile away, and this will have the opposite Butterfly Effect than you were hoping to have. And while determining what actions will have a Butterfly Effect cannot be fully predicted, it is well understood that when you genuinely care about your team members and you treat them with respect and admiration, the likelihood of you finding something that has a disproportionately positive impact will increase dramatically.

