HOW "LEADING QUIETLY" OFFERS REALISTIC HELP WITH THE DIFFICULT, IMPORTANT HUMAN PROBLEMS

Looking at leadership with a wide-angle lens shows that men and women who do not fit the traditional heroic mold are, daily, successfully solving important organizational, ethical, and practical problems—and contributing to a better world. Such quiet leaders operate from a realistic, not cynical, world view based on four guiding principles: You don’t know everything; you will be surprised; keep an eye on the insiders; and trust, but cut the cards.

Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

Every profession and walk of life has its great figures, leaders, and heroes. Think of the men and women who create or transform major companies, the political leaders who reshape society, the firefighters who risk their lives to save others. We exalt these individuals as role models and celebrate their achievements. They represent, we feel, the true model of leadership.

But do they really? I ask this because, over the course of a career spent studying management and leadership, I have observed that the most effective leaders are rarely public heroes. These men and women aren’t high-profile champions of causes, and don’t want to be. They don’t spearhead ethical crusades. They move patiently, carefully, and incrementally. They do what is right—for their organizations, for the people around them, and for themselves—inconspicuously and without casualties.

I have come to call these people quiet leaders because their modesty and restraint are in large measure responsible for their impressive achievements. And since many big problems can only be resolved by a long series of small efforts, quiet leadership, despite its seemingly slow pace, often turns out to be the quickest way to make an organization—and the world—a better place.

As the result of a four-year study of quiet leadership, I have learned how quiet leaders work and have drawn practical lessons from their efforts. Out of this has grown an unorthodox view of leadership. It builds on the heroic approach, but offers a

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much broader perspective on what counts as responsible, effective leadership in organizations.

**ALBERT SCHWEITZER’S VIEW**

But do we really need a broader perspective? Don’t the great leaders teach us what we need to know? These are important questions, and the answer to them isn’t simple.

Stories of heroic effort do teach us indispensable lessons in courage and dedication. They also show us the highest human ideals and help parents and teachers pass on important values. And these are not merely stories: Without the efforts of great individuals, our world would be an emptier and meaner place. We owe these men and women our admiration and gratitude.

The problem is that the heroic view of leadership looks at people in terms of a pyramid. At the top are the great figures. They have clear, strong values and know right from wrong. They act boldly, sacrifice themselves for noble causes, set compelling examples for others, and ultimately change the world. At the bottom of the pyramid are life’s bystanders, shirkers, and cowards. These are T.S. Eliot’s “hollow men,” afraid to act and preoccupied with self-interest. They inspire no one and change nothing.

The pyramid approach, by saying little about everyday life and ordinary people, seems to consign much of humanity to a murky, moral limbo.

But where does this view leave everyone else? Most people, most of the time, are neither saving the world nor exploiting it. They are living their lives, doing their jobs, and trying to take care of the people around them. The pyramid approach, by saying little about everyday life and ordinary people, seems to consign much of humanity to a murky, moral limbo. This is a serious mistake.

Consider the view of Albert Schweitzer, a man who, by any standard, was a truly heroic leader. In his late twenties, Schweitzer abandoned two promising career paths—one as a musician, the other as a theologian—that would have led to a comfortable, settled, and secure life. Instead, he became a medical missionary and spent most of his life serving lepers and victims of sleeping sickness in central Africa. His decades of hard, lonely, and sometimes dangerous work were rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, and Schweitzer used the funds from the prize to expand his hospital. He worked there until his death at the age of ninety.

Schweitzer changed many lives and inspired countless others. Yet, in his autobiography, he wrote these words about the role of great individuals in shaping the world:

> Of all the will toward the ideal in mankind only a small part can manifest itself in public action. All the rest of this force must be content with small and obscure deeds. The sum of these, however, is a thousand times stronger than the acts of those who receive wide public recognition. The latter, compared to the former, are like the foam on the waves of a deep ocean.²

This is a remarkable, almost radical statement. Here is Albert Schweitzer, a great man, telling us to rethink and even devalue the role of great figures in human affairs. He compares their efforts to “foam” and instead praises “small and obscure deeds.”

Schweitzer’s view represents a profoundly different way of thinking about leadership. Consider, for example, the Tylenol episode of the early 1980s—probably the most famous tale of responsible business leadership in the last twenty years.

In 1982, someone put cyanide into a number of Tylenol capsules, resulting in the deaths of seven people. The national media seized the story and wouldn’t let go. Millions of Americans panicked, fearing their medicine cabinets contained a deadly poison. Instead of hunkering down, Johnson & Johnson’s chairman, James Burke, took immediate and bold steps to lead the company through the ensuing crisis. He cooperated swiftly and fully with public authorities and the media, defining the crisis as an issue of public health, not corporate profits. He immediately withdrew all Tylenol from the market, costing his company millions of dollars. Johnson & Johnson then quickly introduced triple-seal packing for Tylenol, and the industry soon followed its example. Burke received enormous credit for his efforts and surely earned it.
This story is dramatic and inspiring and has been told and retold countless times. Yet, from Schweitzer's perspective, this chronicle of leadership can easily mislead us. Is the Tylenol episode the real story of responsible leadership at Johnson & Johnson during the 1980s? What was everyone else in the company doing during this period? Were the thousands of managers, supervisors, and other employees just cranking out Tylenol capsules, Band-Aids, and other products—all the while enjoying a nice moral holiday?

The answer to this question is clearly no. Like people in organizations everywhere, they were dealing with the difficult everyday challenges of life and work: making sure the products they sold were safe, helping coworkers with personal problems, developing new drugs and medical devices, and making sure their employees were treated with fairness and respect. The "nonheroes" at Johnson & Johnson did all this without the resources and support available to the company's executives, and they did these things day after day and year after year. In the grand scheme of things, their cumulative effort made the world a much better place. In fact, from Schweitzer's perspective, their efforts were the grand scheme of things.

To understand and learn from what these men and women did, we have to take Schweitzer's perspective to heart. This means looking away from great figures, extreme situations, and moments of high historical drama and paying closer attention to people around us. If we look at leadership with a wide-angle lens, we can see men and women who are far from heroes and yet are successfully solving important problems and contributing to a better world.

MESSY, EVERYDAY CHALLENGES

This broader perspective reveals that the vast majority of problems calling for leadership are everyday situations. These situations don't come labeled as strategic or critical, and they aren't reserved for people at the top of organizations. Anyone can face these challenges at almost any time. Hard choices don't involve "time out" from everyday life, but are embedded in its very fabric.

Imagine, for example, that you could hover over a town, lift the roofs off houses, offices, and other buildings, and watch what is going on inside. In one home, a couple is arguing about moving the man's father into a nursing home. In an office, two government officials are talking quietly about investigating a long-term employee rumored to be pilfering funds. The head of a hospital emergency room stares at a spreadsheet, wondering if she can avoid imminent reductions in the number of indigent patients her unit treats. A loan officer at a bank has just discovered a serious accounting error: Should he report it and create an organizational mess or just leave things alone?

Ostensibly ordinary problems can be incredibly messy, complicated, ambiguous—and important. As such, they are real leadership challenges.

These are everyday practical problems, routine and unremarkable—or, at least, that's how they look at first. But closer inspection reveals something else. Ostensibly ordinary problems can be incredibly messy, complicated, ambiguous—and important. As such, they are real leadership challenges.

Take the case of the loan officer. What could be more mundane, even tedious, than an accounting problem? But once the loan officer stopped and looked carefully at the issue, he found there was nothing simple about it. Why, for example, had such a large problem been overlooked for so long? One dismaying possibility was that senior management had buried the error and wanted it to stay that way. Bringing the problem to light could cost a colleague his job and cause one of the bank's clients to go bankrupt. But concealing the problem would be a violation of the law and the loan officer's sense of professionalism and integrity. In this case and many others, the "everydayness" of problems disguises their real complexity.

The loan officer, like men and women in organizations everywhere, was dealing with just one of a multitude of difficult, commonplace challenges. What do you do, for example, when you don't have the time or the resources to do what you really believe you should do? What if doing the right thing involves bending or breaking the rules? What if a situation is so murky and uncertain you don't even know what the right
thing is? What if someone with a lot of power is pressuring you to do something wrong? Questions like these define the complex territory of responsible, everyday leadership.

The loan officer did the right thing—but in ways that don’t fit the heroic model. He found a way to disclose the problem, get the loan restructured, protect his colleague’s job, and avoid risking his own. He accomplished this without doing anything dramatic or heroic. Instead, he followed many of the guidelines I present here. His efforts were cautious and well planned, he moved shrewdly and kept his political antennae fully extended, and he bent some of the bank’s rules in the process of doing what was right. In short, he resolved his problem through a distinctive, unorthodox, and extremely useful way of thinking and acting.

SURPRISING APPROACHES

My understanding of this approach to leadership emerged after I carefully examined scores of situations in which someone, typically a manager in an organization, faced a difficult ethical challenge and resolved it in a practical, responsible way. I found that in these situations, individuals rarely took bold, courageous steps. They didn’t articulate values and inspire a large number of other people to follow them. They had little interest in self-sacrifice. Often, they weren’t even sure how to get a handle on the problem in front of them.

Each of the guidelines for quiet leadership is a two-edged sword, and all of them can become excuses for doing nothing or taking sleazy shortcuts.

As individuals, these men and women were modest and unassuming, skeptical or shrewdly realistic, and had a healthy sense of their own self-interest. They weren’t charismatic, had little power, and didn’t see themselves as leaders in the conventional sense. Their idea of taking action was working behind the scenes—patiently, carefully, and prudently. In the end, they did the right thing or at least got it done. They handled difficult choices and tough situations in ways that made the world a better place.

The specific guidelines that quiet leaders often follow can be summarized briefly:

- When facing a difficult problem, do not kid yourself about how well you understand the situation or how much you can control.
- In difficult situations, you should expect your motives to be mixed and even confused, but mixed motives can be valuable and useful.
- Count your political capital and spend it carefully.
- If your situation is uncertain or hazardous, find ways to buy time before you do anything.
- Use the time not to moralize or preach, but to drill down into the technical and political aspects of your situation.
- Search hard for imaginative ways to bend the rules.
- Instead of moving aggressively to solve a problem, try to nudge, test, and escalate gradually.
- Finally, don’t dismiss compromises as an invaluable practical art and the essence of responsible leadership.

Although the guidelines can be stated simply, using them well is tricky business. For one thing, they can be misinterpreted and misused. Bending the rules can shade into breaking them. Some compromises are nothing more than unimaginative exercises in splitting the difference, while others are sell-outs of basic principles. Each of the guidelines for quiet leadership is a two-edged sword, and all of them can become excuses for doing nothing or taking sleazy shortcuts. Hence, each guideline has to be understood fully and examined carefully.

The guidelines can also be misleading if they are viewed as the right way to deal with all really hard organizational problems. There are times when the right course of action is clear, when compromises betray important values, and when leadership means taking a stand and paying a price. Quiet leaders understand that some situations require direct, forceful, courageous action, and a few even call for heroism. Hence, it is critical to have a sense of when and how these tools should be used and to understand their limits and risks.
In general, however, quiet leaders see their approach as the most useful way to deal with the difficult problems that come their way. They view strong measures and heroism as a last resort, not the first choice or the standard model. This is why Navy fliers, the brave men and women who land streaking jets on aircraft carriers, are told in training that "there are no old, bold pilots." In other words, preparation, caution, care, and attention to detail are usually the best approach to everyday challenges.

THERE ARE NO LITTLE THINGS

But what do these patient, unglamorous, everyday efforts add up to? The answer is they are almost everything. The vast majority of difficult, important human problems—both inside and outside organizations—are not solved by a swift, decisive stroke from someone at the top. What usually matters are careful, thoughtful, small, practical efforts by people working far from the limelight. In short, quiet leadership is what moves and changes the world.

This conclusion is both important and easy to dismiss. From the time we are very young, we learn to admire great leaders, the men and women whose vision, courage, and sacrifice have made our world a much better place. But thinking only about great figures and bold, historic acts can make it hard to understand why quiet, everyday leadership matters as much as it does.

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Sometimes small efforts are snowballs that roll down hills and accumulate force. Sometimes, in situations poised on the knife’s edge, they tip things in the right direction. Sometimes ostensibly small acts influence other people months or even years later by taking root in their experience, gestating, and shaping their development. And even when larger consequences do not flow from small acts, these acts matter simply because they are right. Bruce Barton, a remarkable business executive who founded a major ad agency, served in Congress, and wrote widely about religion, observed, “Sometimes, when I consider what tremendous consequences come from little things—a chance word, a tap on the shoulder, or a penny dropped on a newsstand—I am tempted to think there are no little things.”

Put differently, quiet leadership is more than a set of highly pragmatic tactics. It is a way of thinking about people, organizations, and effective action. It is a way of understanding the flow of events and discerning the best ways to make a difference. And in a small way, quiet leadership is also an act of faith: an expression of confidence in the ultimate force of what Schweitzer called “small and obscure deeds.” In fact, this implicit faith is something quiet leaders share with great leaders and heroes—most of whom worked quietly and patiently, for years or decades, laying the groundwork for their celebrated achievements.

DON’T KID YOURSELF

Quiet leaders are realists. They try hard to see the world as it is. This means recognizing, almost as a sixth sense, that all sorts of things can happen and often do. And they happen because people act for all sorts of reasons, virtuous and vicious, clear and muddle-headed, sensible and nutty. Realism, in other words, isn’t pessimism or cynicism. It is making ample room for the many ways in which people and events can surprise, dismay, and astonish.

Sometimes things turn out worse than expected, and simple-looking problems turn out to be treacherous and complicated. This is why quiet leaders move carefully, put together contingency plans, and watch their backs. Sometimes things turn out much better than expected, so they are ready to seize opportunities. And quite often things simply turn out very differently from what anyone expects. Then they are ready to scramble and maneuver.

Quiet leaders see the world as a kaleidoscope rather than a fixed target or a well-mapped terrain. In most organizations, most of the time, self-interest, shortsightedness, and chicanery are tumbling together with shards of loyalty, commitment, perseverance, and integrity. The churning is continuous—propelled by the dynamism.
of the modern economy, the restlessness and vibrancy of contemporary life, and the age-old drivers of human nature.

Hence, quiet leaders value trust, but they don’t forget how fragile it can be. While they aren’t cynics, they don’t overestimate the idealism of other people—or their own. They are acutely aware of the limits and subtleties of power, even for people with impressive job titles. And quiet leaders don’t forget that the world is divided between powerful insiders, vigilantly guarding their interests, and ambitious outsiders, vying to reach the inner circle. These are among the many reasons why they move step-by-step to deal with serious problems.

Consider, for example, the experiences of Rebecca Olson, a physician who had just started a new job as head of a small hospital. Among her initial challenges was handling charges of sexual harassment against a senior member of her management team. Olson had handled problems like this before and knew the routine. The problem was aggravating and unpleasant, but didn’t seem that difficult to solve—at least not at the beginning.

DEALING WITH RICHARD MILLAR

In 1997, Rebecca Olson had just become chief executive officer (CEO) of St. Clement’s Hospital in Omaha, Nebraska. Many people were surprised when Olson got the job because her management experience consisted of eight years as vice president of a chain of small, “doc-in-the-box” clinics owned by a large HMO. Moreover, unlike all her predecessors, Olson wasn’t Catholic.

Clearly, the St. Clement’s board had taken a calculated risk in hiring Olson. The board members had quickly agreed on the problems facing the hospital, but had difficulty deciding who was the right person to address them. The hospital had been losing market share for years, and several similar facilities had been forced to close their doors. Managed care had led to high turnover among the hospital’s doctors, nurses, and administrators, and patient complaints were rising fast. Olson’s supporters on the board believed she would bring energy, intensity, and creative new approaches to delivering medical care. Others on the board supported an inside candidate, believing the financially fragile hospital needed a leader who knew the institution inside out. Eventually, the board agreed to hire Olson.

A few days after she started work, the board chairman told Olson about a troubling personnel issue. Melanie Wermert, a clerical employee with physical infirmities, was about to file a complaint with the state employment agency accusing the hospital’s vice president of operations, Richard Millar, of sexual harassment and discrimination. Olson had met Millar just a few weeks earlier, had a pleasant conversation with him, and remembered his confidence and quiet charm. Millar, a tall, distinguished-looking man in his mid-fifties, had worked at St. Clement’s for twenty-five years. He had held almost every important nonmedical position, including community affairs director and head of accounting. Millar came from a prominent Omaha family and was the inside candidate supported by the cautious board members. Until the board announced its choice of Rebecca Olson, most of the hospital staff believed Millar would be the next CEO.

As soon as the chairman left her office, Olson let her anger bubble to the surface. The chairman and a few others had known about the charges for several weeks, but had waited until now to tell Olson. Even worse, the chairman confessed that he had discussed the matter with the previous CEO, who had decided not to get involved because he wouldn’t be able to see the issue through to its conclusion. Olson thought this was simply a cop-out. She also realized that she identified very strongly with Wermert, even though they had never met. Like Wermert, Olson was physically disabled. She walked with a pronounced limp, the result of a freak sledding accident when she was a teenager.

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Since Olson had handled several other harassment complaints at past jobs, she understood the problem in front of her. The hospital’s reputation, already hurt by financial problems, could suffer from a scandal. If the state commission found that harassment had occurred, it could penalize the hospital, and the victim could file suit. Olson’s handling of the situation would
also color her initial relationship with the hospital staff, its board, and, if the matter became public, the local community.

Olson began working on the problem immediately. Fortunately, the hospital had a process for investigating harassment charges, and she set these wheels in motion. In interviews with the hospital’s outside counsel, Wermert repeated her charges, and a coworker revealed that Wermert had told her about the incident shortly after it happened. In other interviews, rumors surfaced that Millar had harassed another woman at the hospital, but she had moved out of the state and could not be located. The hospital’s lawyer also told Olson that he suspected his investigation was being impeded because some people were intimidated by Millar. He had also heard allegations that Millar had recently bullied two employees into leaving their jobs because he disliked them.

As Olson heard more about Millar’s vindictive character, she found, to her surprise, that she was growing wary of him, even though this was the last thing that anyone who knew her would have expected. As a child, Olson played sports year-round and, because she played so aggressively, was frequently injured. After the sledding accident, when she could no longer compete in sports, she turned her high school and college studies into intense, competitive events. Some of her medical school professors were tough and blunt, but she was proud that none of them had intimidated her. As a manager, Olson was viewed as direct, forceful, and sometimes harsh. Over the years, she had received several performance reviews suggesting she “tone down” her style, but she hadn’t paid much attention to this advice.

Millar’s tranquility alarmed Olson. She assumed he knew something about the charges against him because he had friends all around the hospital. But Olson saw Millar several times a day, often spending an hour or two in meetings with him, and he always seemed calm and relaxed. One afternoon, she even watched him trying to make small talk with one of his alleged victims. The woman sat rigidly and looked past Millar while he smiled and leaned against the side of her desk. This gave Olson the creeps. Millar didn’t seem to care what he had done or whether he was being investigated. He seemed to think he was bulletproof.

The lawyer’s report left Olson with little doubt that Millar deserved to be fired. In fact, Olson’s gut reaction was that he should not just be fired, but dragged out of his office and thrown into the street. She didn’t want him to get away with his reprehensible behavior and believed it belonged on his permanent record. In addition, firing Millar would also meet the principal demand of the woman who had charged him with harassment. She had indicated that she would not go to the state board if the hospital fired Millar, and this would avoid a lot of ugly publicity.

...she took her big problem, broke it down into a long series of small steps and tasks, and then worked diligently on each of them.

In the end, however, Olson decided she would not fire Millar and would not charge him with sexual harassment. Instead, she would try to get him to resign. Before asking for his resignation, however, Olson decided to get “all her ducks lined up.” In other words, she took her big problem, broke it down into a long series of small steps and tasks, and then worked diligently on each of them. Like the other quiet leaders in this book, she understood that small things matter a lot and that they can be very hard to get right. For example, she prepared a detailed report on the investigation. In addition, she spent hours with lawyers, knowing that her actions had to both comply with the law on sexual harassment and also respect Millar’s rights as someone accused of a serious offense. She labored over the severance package so that it reflected the hospital’s implicit obligations to a long-term employee. In parallel with all this legal work, Olson met privately with two board members who were likely to support her plan, and they worked on ways to approach other board members.

Eventually, Olson’s allies on the board met informally with other board members and made the case for easing Millar out of his job. Their arguments were taken from a “menu” Olson and her allies had developed and customized for particular individuals. The arguments included the seriousness of the charges, the likelihood of a debilitating scandal, the possibility Olson would resign, and the need to recognize Millar’s many years of
service to the hospital. Finally, at a secret meeting, a majority of the board voted in favor of offering Millar a generous severance package.

Because of Millar's history of threatening behavior, Olson had a hospital security officer wait outside her office when she met with Millar. The meeting was set for the late afternoon. When Millar arrived, Olson was sitting at her desk, with the board chairman next to her. Millar, who thought he was coming to a regular administrative meeting, walked in, looked around, and realized something was up. Then he dashed out of the office. A moment later, he returned with one of his longtime friends on the hospital staff. Millar wanted to have a witness at the meeting.

In carefully scripted words, Olson told him she was asking for his resignation. She described the investigation and its findings. Then she told him about the severance package the board had approved. She finished by giving him a letter of resignation, explaining that if he signed it, this would be his last day of work. He would leave the hospital immediately after the meeting. The next morning, someone would get his personal belongings from his office and deliver them to his home.

For weeks, Olson felt she had been walking around in an enormous, thick, heavy coat. Now it was gone.

Olson was relieved that she had kept her voice from quavering. The board chairman said nothing and there was a moment of stillness. Millar's face turned beefy red, and then he lunged across the table and begged the chairman not to let him be fired. The chairman was startled and told Millar to get a grip. Then he said he was very sorry about everything that had happened and suggested to Millar he should make the best of the situation and get on with his life. Millar sat back and said nothing. He picked up the resignation letter and read it slowly. As he did, his icy poise returned. He read the letter again, signed it, and left the room without a word.

The next day, Olson told the hospital's senior staff that Millar would not be returning to work. Her scripted words supported the board's official position that Millar was resigning. She said the hospital valued Millar's many years of service, wished him good fortune in his future endeavors, reminded everyone that the work of the hospital had to go on, and announced an interim replacement for him. Some people were surprised by her announcement, but others seemed to have been tipped off by the rumor mill.

Olson's two months of surreptitious planning had been implemented without a miscue. Within a week, Millar had accepted the severance package. The harasser was gone, Millar's victim was satisfied, no petition would go to the state employment agency, and the local media didn't get the story. For weeks, Olson felt she had been walking around in an enormous, thick, heavy coat. Now it was gone.

A month later, at 6:30 in the morning, Olson's home phone rang. The hospital's human resource director told her to be sure to read the morning paper. A front-page story described Millar's "firing" and his unfair treatment by St. Clement's Hospital. The entire piece was written from Millar's perspective. During the next few weeks, the paper published several letters from Millar's allies criticizing Olson and the hospital board. When reporters contacted the hospital for its side of the story, they learned little because the investigation could not be made public.

During this period, someone broke into the hospital's human resource files, Olson and the woman who initially charged Millar with harassment received threatening late-night phone calls, and a rock was thrown through a window of Olson's home. None of this could be linked to Millar, who lived just a few blocks from Olson, but she viewed it as revenge tactics. The hospital developed a siege mentality, and Olson later said that feelings of paranoia and persecution became part of her everyday existence. Only when Millar took a job on the West Coast did things finally quiet down for Rebecca Olson and St. Clement's Hospital. And even then, a few board members continued to speak approvingly of Millar, and several of them remained distant and unfriendly to Olson.

FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Viewed from the heroic perspective, Olson's approach can look more like a cop-out than a profile in courage. There was strong evidence against Millar, and the law was on Olson's side. In ethical terms, firing him seemed to be the clear right
choice, and this was also what her deep convictions told her to do. Firing him also seemed practical—after all, Olson was the boss and someone who didn’t shy away from a fight.

So why didn’t she just step up and do the “right thing”? Why didn’t she take a direct, forceful approach? She was new to her job, so perhaps she lacked confidence. Perhaps Millar had intimidated her, as he had so many others. But even if fear explains Olson’s behavior, it hardly justifies it.

The answer is that she looked at her situation in unsentimental, realistic terms and decided it would be futile and irresponsible to attack the problem head-on. Fortunately, she didn’t see the problem as a test of her courage or a chance to just do the right thing. She wanted to protect the hospital and didn’t want to risk her job or her reputation. Despite her CEO title, she realized she didn’t have much power. Olson felt she was walking into a minefield and decided that zigzagging cautiously was the best way to move forward—an approach that helped resolve the Richard Millar problem in a practical and responsible way.

Olson succeeded because she saw her situation for what it was. This wasn’t because she knew much about the hospital or the people she had to deal with. All this was new to her. What helped her enormously was her view of how the world works. She viewed people and situations in terms of four guiding principles. These helped her understand what was really going on and kept her out of harm’s way. They also gave her a very accurate sense of her situation and helped her navigate through the fast-moving, turbulent waters around her.

You Don’t Know Everything. Situations calling for quiet leadership are usually complicated, uncertain, and hazardous. To survive and succeed it is critical to be realistic and not exaggerate how much you really understand.

Consider the uncertainties surrounding Olson. Some were personal and professional. Did she—or anyone, for that matter—have the skills to turn St. Clement’s around? Health care was changing rapidly, competition was intense, and her hospital was a weak institution. Olson had never hesitated about taking the CEO job, yet she often lay awake early in the morning wondering if she was in over her head. The answer, she suspected, wouldn’t be clear for several years.

The politics of management was another variable. When Olson started working at St. Clement’s, she had little idea who was competent and who wasn’t. Nor did she know who her real allies were. What if she ran into difficulties during her first year or two? She thought things were likely to get worse before they got better, and she knew that a serious restructuring would threaten almost everyone. While this was going on, Millar’s supporters on the board would be comparing her efforts with what they thought Millar would have done. Because imagined performances can easily outstrip actual ones, they could quickly become unhappy with her efforts.

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The harassment issue was, of course, a minefield of its own. Olson was strongly inclined to believe Wermert’s story, even though she had to admit that it was, to some degree, a “he said, she said” case. If Olson proceeded with the investigation, Millar would almost certainly deny the charges. This raised the prospect of a long, nasty battle—in court, on the board, and in the hospital corridors. His reputation would give him credibility and some of his longstanding allies would back him. Others might question Olson’s motives. Was she trying to drive him out of the hospital? Was she power-hungry? Was she afraid to work with strong people? On the other hand, if Olson told Wermert her case wasn’t strong enough, Wermert would probably file charges with the state commission. Millar would fight back, the local press would have a new toy, Millar’s allies would mobilize, and a good deal of the hospital’s time and energy would be diverted from the urgent task of turning things around.

Olson also faced ethical uncertainties. She had to decide what she owed to the hospital, to Melanie Wermert, to herself, and even to Richard Millar, who after all had a right to fair treatment and due process. Did Olson’s responsibility to seek justice for Wermert trump her responsibility to the hospital and its reputation? These issues were difficult enough, but ethical factors made the
situation even more challenging and hazardous. Ethical charges, like those against Millar, can set off wildfires inside organizations. They trigger intense emotions, reinforce loyalties, and sometimes split organizations into warring camps. Millar was not accused of an oversight, poor judgment, or some kind of professional incompetence. His character was under attack, as were, to a lesser degree, the character and judgment of his friends and supporters. It is one thing to accuse people of making mistakes, and quite another to accuse them of being evil and duplicitous or of befriending people like this. Hence, the charges against Millar could easily inflame and complicate Olson's other problems.

The territory lying ahead of Olson was strewn with significant uncertainties and hazards. Mistakes would hurt her, the hospital, and many others. Olson felt insecure and hesitant, so she moved very cautiously. None of this was a sign of weakness or cowardice. It simply indicated that she understood what was really going on. In short, Olson was a realist—she didn’t kid herself about the complexities of her situation. She approached her problem with an attitude of modesty and humility and was quite willing to accept how much she didn’t know.

**You Will Be Surprised.** These four words say a great deal about the worldview of quiet leaders. Like Olson, they try to see several moves ahead on the chessboard. They analyze, prepare, and plan. They think about the unknowns and make careful judgments about them. But, even after all this effort, they still expect people and events to surprise them.

Put differently, quiet leaders believe there are two types of unknowns they have to deal with. Some are the known unknowns. These are the significant variables that could go one way or another. Good leaders try to plan for these contingencies. The other type of unknown is more challenging. It consists of the unknown unknowns. These cannot be anticipated or planned for. They aren’t on anyone’s radar screen. They sneak up on people and make a hash of their well-laid plans.

The many surprises, large and small, in the brief story of Rebecca Olson show how important it is to plan on surprises.

Each of these surprises can be explained. None was a purely random event. But the logic behind unknown unknowns becomes apparent only in retrospect. The board probably took a calculated risk in hiring Olson; perhaps its leaders hid the Millar problem so Olson would accept the job; Millar may have been a self-destructive type; Wermert was furious and may have wanted revenge at almost any cost; and perhaps Olson feared Millar because he was causing her to crack under the pressure. Before they occurred, Olson hadn’t anticipated any of these developments. This wasn’t because she was naïve, shortsighted, or unimaginative. Olson had tried very hard to understand what she was getting into, and she thought she understood the risks she was running, but some of the factors that shaped her first year on the job had basically swooped down from nowhere.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that life can be understood looking backward but must be lived going forward. In retrospect, we
can often find reasons why some things happened and others didn’t. But the problem for people like Rebecca Olson involves looking forward. Usually there are a variety of factors and forces at work in a situation, and it is hard to tell which will matter most.

Some people believe they have a simple answer to this problem: just expect people to act in their self-interest. This seems perfectly sensible. But, in many cases, people pursue their interests fitfully, belatedly, and indirectly. Sometimes, as in Millar’s case, they make mistakes, or they get lazy and take shortcuts, or their emotions or unconscious minds take over, or they’re unsure what their interests really are. And even when individuals pursue their interests directly, they collide with others doing the same thing. It is very hard to forecast the vector sum of self-interest, altruism, confusion, greed, opportunism, dedication, and rationality.

For managers in today’s tumultuous world, rationality means expecting a few things to happen tomorrow that weren’t anticipated today and couldn’t have been. This is the basis for the saying that life is what happens when you’re planning something else. It is also the reason Olson decided to orchestrate Millar’s resignation rather than fire him. She didn’t want to be surprised yet again—by Millar’s ability to fight back or by the capacity of other insiders to tolerate the failings of one of their own.

Olson saw quickly that the question of right and wrong was the easiest part of her problem. Fortunately, she also realized that her real challenge was recognizing and making progress in a fluid, complex, and uncertain situation. As a result, the second principle that guided her was one that President Eisenhower, a careful, quiet man who planned the largest military invasion in history, put in these words: “Rely on planning, but don’t trust plans.”

Keep an Eye on the Insiders. The third guiding principle flies in the face of a lot of contemporary talk about flat organizations, the end of hierarchy, and the replacement of bosses by mentors and coaches. It says, bluntly, that organizations are divided into relatively secure insiders and expendable outsiders. In other words, they operate like little solar systems. Some people are close to the center of things, while others move in distant, wobbly orbits.

In large traditional organizations, the insiders are typically the winners of a long, intense struggle for the senior positions—they have climbed to the top of the greasy pole. In smaller, younger firms, insiders are the ones who put the company together and contribute skills, funds, and key relationships. These insiders usually own a good deal of the stock and have options to buy more. When they call, the CEO picks up the phone.

Of course, the boundaries between inner and outer circles aren’t airtight, and organizations don’t publish charts showing who the insiders are. But most people have a sense of where others are positioned in relation to the inner circle of power and influence. They know who gets invited to the important meetings and who is consulted before the meetings even take place. They know that the insiders determine who gets funds, promotions, kudos, and opportunities—including the opportunity to become an insider. And until this happens, outsiders are expendable.

Rebecca Olson understood all this quite well. In her old job, she was an inside player. Now she was starting over again. The inner circle at St. Clement’s, as she understood it, consisted of five long-time members of the hospital board, the local Catholic archbishop, two attorneys who often represented the hospital, and a few long-time hospital employees, including Millar. Although as CEO Olson looked like an insider to the rest of the world, she was really on probation. Her supporters on the board were willing to work with her and help her, as were some board members who had preferred other candidates. But to become a true insider, Olson had to develop credibility and relationships. This would require time, a good deal of work together, and, above all, a track record of success. Until then, she was expendable.

This is partly why Olson moved very cautiously in dealing with Richard Millar. In seeking to force his resignation, she was asking the inner circle to cast out one of its own. They had good reasons to do this, but they could easily have been
tempted by other options. They could have tried to placate Wermert and then gracefully eased their friend Millar out of the organization over a longer, less awkward period. Or some of Millar’s long-time allies might have even tried to deny there was a problem. It would have been easy for one of them to say, “Aren’t there usually two sides to these harassment stories? I’ve known Dick Millar for years, and I can’t believe he’d do this.”

Given these possibilities, Olson wanted Millar to resign and disappear quietly. She chose this option even though she thought he deserved to be fired without a nickel of severance pay. But if he had been fired, Millar could have fought back, mobilized his supporters, threatened legal action, disparaged Olson, and bogged the hospital down in a long controversy. Olson wanted to avoid this, put the Millar issue behind her, and get to work on the hospital’s urgent problems. She might have acted differently had their positions been reversed. But even though Millar reported to her, and even though she had strong evidence against him, Olson didn’t forget who was the outsider and who was the insider, and she acted accordingly.

Trust, but Cut the Cards. We live in a cynical era. Television and newspapers regularly report on public figures who have feet, or even torsos, of clay. Historians have documented the frailties and failings of almost every great figure of the past. Surveys regularly show that most people hold public officials, business executives, lawyers, and many other professionals in very low regard. In organizations, most people have heard the “inside” stories of what the people at the top are really up to, and it usually isn’t nice.

One reaction to all this negativity is to accept it as a basic truth about life. But this is a bleak and destructive worldview. It also leads people to operate under the principle of “Do unto others before they do unto you,” a precept that rarely makes the world a better place. An alternative, of course, is to try hard to look beyond all the cynicism and remain hopeful about human nature. This is an admirable instinct, but it can leave individuals vulnerable to the scalawags and predators among us. Too much trust is as hazardous as too little.

For quiet leaders, trust resembles a fine piece of crystal. It is hard to create, very valuable, and quite fragile. Quiet leaders are not cynics, but they give their trust carefully and don’t treat it like loose change. They work hard to earn the trust of others and expect others to do the same with them. And sometimes, they look at a person or a situation, decide that the chances of creating a trusting relationship are virtually nil, and then they proceed very carefully.

This was exactly how Olson reacted to Millar. She had little reason to trust a slick operator like him. Also, until Olson arrived and deposed him, he had been the crown prince of the little kingdom of St. Clement’s. In all likelihood, he knew Olson was investigating him and was preparing his defenses. She had to assume he would do whatever was necessary to protect his interests. An old Italian maxim says, “Believe none of what you hear and half of what you see,” and it describes how Olson treated Millar.

**Quiet leaders are not cynics, but they give their trust carefully and don’t treat it like loose change.**

But Millar was a simple problem for her. It was clear she couldn’t trust him and she didn’t. Her real challenge was determining who might support her—on the harassment issue and on the major changes the hospital badly needed. Olson hadn’t yet worked with any of the employees or senior staff of the hospital. In contrast, Millar had friends throughout the hospital—people he had hired, promoted, and worked with—but none of them wore buttons saying, “I’m Dick’s pal.” In her first few weeks, Olson made preliminary judgments about individuals, but these were tentative. She was the new boss and it was prudent for everyone to try to be positive and helpful. Trust takes time, and it was simply too early for Olson to have much confidence in anyone.

Even Olson’s relationship with the board was fragile. When she got the job, the board members told her how much they looked forward to working with her and offered to help out whenever they could, and she had spent several hours with the board chairman and liked him. But no one told her anything about the Millar time bomb, and Olson felt it would be a while before the board regained her confidence. And inevitably she wondered what else she hadn’t been told.
virtuous and vicious, inspiring and dismaying. They make plenty of room for the unexpected.

For example, a partner at an accounting firm had engaged in a sleazy maneuver while managing a major audit. In order to make his client happy and not risk the account, he turned a blind eye to a set of accounting problems that, if reported, would have wiped out the company's profits for an entire year. Before the audit was finalized, however, a manager at the accounting firm objected to the deal—on ethical grounds. The partner realized he had made a serious mistake and told his client that the accounting problems had to be disclosed. When the client threatened to fire the accounting firm, the partner stood his ground. In the end, the company's board of directors did not shoot the messenger and replace its accounting firm; instead, it thanked the firm for its honesty.

To a cynic, this story sounds like science fiction, but it underscores the important difference between cynicism and realism. Cynics paint the world a uniform shade of pessimistic gray. Realists acknowledge the full, fertile range of things that can and do happen. Cynics believe that people work endless hours starting companies because they are greedy and want to get rich. Realists recognize the power of money, but they make room for other motives: excitement, the love of challenge and creativity, and making a statement in life. The case of the contrite auditor is extreme, but commitment, loyalty, and altruism sometimes take root in very dry soil. Realists don't expect this to happen very often, but they don't rule it out—because they rule out very little.

A cynic would say that Olson got a bad deal. The previous CEO dumped the Millar problem in her lap, the board had conned her, and her first year was a mess. A realist wouldn't deny this: For many months, the Millar problem was a bone in Olson's throat. Moreover, her way of handling the problem had drawbacks. Millar hadn't been given his day in court—though the evidence strongly indicated he was guilty, he was forced out before he could defend himself. In addition, hospital staff might wonder whether her skills at organizational maneuvering and guerilla warfare would be used against them, and this would weaken their trust and confidence, which she needed for the hard tasks ahead.

But cynical or negative views of Olson's efforts are badly incomplete: In time, she found that the Millar episode had several surprisingly positive consequences. It forced Olson, the hospital attorney, and several board members to work together, hard and long. They began to trust each other. Olson started becoming an insider. And once Millar was gone, Olson didn't have to deal with a powerful, in-house rival. In getting rid of him, she had also displayed tenacity and political savvy. The hospital staff could see that she was now in charge. And just as important, Olson felt she was in charge—and readier for the hard task of restructuring St. Clement's and leading the hospital in a hard and uncertain environment.

Realism accounts for much of what Olson did, but not everything. Many people see the world as she did—straight on, without sentimentality or cynicism. They recognize that all sorts of things can and do happen. But faced with a difficult situation, many people do nothing: they see, they understand, but they don't act. And realism gives them reasons to stay on the sidelines. They say, "You can't fight City Hall" or "You have to pick your battles" or "It's not my job." With a little imagination, Olson could have found ways to sidestep the Millar problem. She could have delegated it to the hospital lawyer or let the board handle the mess. She could have tried to discourage the victim from pressing charges, which might have won her Millar's loyalty.

But Olson did none of this. She took personal responsibility, ran risks, and lost many nights of sleep. But why? Why do quiet leaders take on challenges they could easily avoid? They don't kid themselves about how things work, but their sober realism about people, organizations, and the happenstance of life doesn't paralyze them.

NOTES

3. This quotation and biographical information on Bruce Barton can be found at http://www.ciadvertising.org/student_account/spring_01/adv382/suz/intro.htm, June 12, 2001.
In short, when Olson looked realistically at her situation, she had a hard time finding anyone she could trust. This was yet another reason why she didn’t follow a direct, forceful approach. It would have been foolish to charge ahead when she didn’t know who might stick a leg out to trip her.

The final scenes of the Rebecca Olson story demonstrate the importance of looking at difficult ethical challenges in highly realistic and pragmatic ways. The four guiding principles helped Olson keep her eyes wide open and see things for what they were, and this proved critical in making her ultimate decision about Millar. As time passed, Olson found that insiders’ longstanding loyalties were slow to unwind, she could really rely on only a few people, and the world of St. Clement’s continued to be a fluid, surprising, and sometimes hazardous place.

REALISM VERSUS CYNICISM

If an organizational train wreck is about to occur, the sensible thing is to get out of the way. This is exactly what Olson’s predecessor had done by ignoring the charges against Millar until he retired. Olson could have taken a similar approach. Nothing compelled her to walk into the minefield Millar had created. One option, which she considered seriously while she was in the middle of the Millar situation, was to look for another job. Olson later said:

> Every rational instinct in my body said to submit my resignation to the board. I had fired people before, but this mess wasn’t what I signed up for, and there wasn’t full disclosure when they hired me. Professionally, I could get other good jobs and didn’t need to deal with the ugly fallout of this situation at this stage in my career.

Nobody wants to start a new job with problems like the ones Olson found, and no one wants these problems to fester, week after week, month after month. But hopes are one thing and expectations another, and this is why realists like Olson do not decamp when they run into serious problems. Realists understand that unpleasant surprises come with the territory. Caution, due diligence, and step-by-step planning are valuable, sometimes indispensable, but they don’t guarantee smooth sailing. No one would have guessed that Millar would spend several months stirring the pot and playing dirty tricks when the rational thing for him to do was to take his money, be grateful he had dodged a bullet, and go away quietly.

Realists aren’t surprised by behavior like his, or by much else—a view of life that reflects an age-old way of thinking. Heraclitus, one of the first Greek philosophers, said it was impossible to step into the same river twice. Reality, for him, was an ever-changing flux. Five hundred years ago, Machiavelli also compared life to a great river, one that flows and surges without warning. “Fortune,” he wrote, “is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.” Samuel Johnson, the great English moralist, saw the world as a “tangled, teeming jungle of plots, follies, vanities, and egoistic passions in which anyone—the innocent and virtuous no less than the vicious—is likely to be ambushed.”

These old truths are uncannily relevant today. In today’s organizations, little is fixed or determined. Money, ideas, talent, and technology flow continuously among companies and countries. Of course, once managers have spent some time doing a particular job, they usually have a feel for it and know what to look out for. This creates moments of stability. But nowadays ambitious, successful people like Rebecca Olson frequently take on new responsibilities and soon find themselves riding new roller coasters. It is critical to understand that the realism guiding people like Rebecca Olson is not cynicism. Cynicism is too simplistic: Dark-tinted glasses distort reality just as badly as rose-tinted ones. In fact, cynics are often quite naïve—they actually believe they can predict human behavior, almost mechanically, by assuming that people will act on the basis of narrow, self-interested, and generally low motives. In contrast, realists expect all sorts of things to happen—good and bad,