# Book **Reality-Based Leadership**

## Ditch the Drama, Restore Sanity to the Workplace, & Turn Excuses Into Results

Cy Wakeman
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## Recommendation

Drama is emotionally expensive. Making up stories based on judgments about your circumstances is human nature, but those stories chew up time and energy and warp your decisions. Leadership consultant Cy Wakeman presents a simple but powerful process for clearing away blame, excuses and unenthusiastic performance. Much of Wakeman's advice is common sense, in keeping with her "reality-based" outlook. She challenges commonly held beliefs about employee management, most notably the idea that the workplace is a democracy. *BooksInShort* recommends her hard-nosed insights to leaders who are ready to conquer the drama.

## Take-Aways

- Your emotional reactions to workplace circumstances provide the raw material for your "story" about them. If you drop your story, only the facts will remain.
- "Reality-Based Leaders" coach employees to act independently.
- They know what questions to ask so they can analyze the facts – not the stories – in a workplace dilemma and then decide how to help.
- Focus on finding fact-based resolutions to problems. Becoming mired in drama or hypothetical situations is not productive.
- Model the behavior you want your employees to emulate.
- Managers get lost in details but leaders provide vision.
- Leaders can teach their employees to be "bulletproof" in the face of change.
- Quit wishing for the perfect work circumstance; it doesn't exist.
- Reward your top performers. Fire underachievers.
- The workplace is not a democracy; everyone's opinion does not count.

## Summary

### Maybe It's All in Your Head

Imagine yourself as an employee whose managers just promoted a co-worker who flattered the boss. You work harder, so you feel snubbed. In your mind, your workplace rewards political connections and ignores the people, like you, who contribute the most. But your conclusion is not "reality-based." You live inside a story that you have created, and – like most other people – you act according to your beliefs, not the facts. Your emotional reactions to your workplace circumstances provide the raw material for your story about them.

> "Reality-Based Leaders...implement decisions with excellence. They value action over opinion."

"Nothing would get done around here if it weren't for me," "I'm underpaid for what I do" and "My co-workers don't appreciate me" are all typical self-constructed narratives. But work's not making you crazy, you are. Seeing things as they are is one thing and imbuing reality with meaning is another. When you judge other people's motives and make assumptions about the causes and effects of their actions, you create an expensive productivity drain.

> "The difference between management and leadership is that management is working on your business and leadership is working on your people."

The most common stories that people make up star themselves in the role of victim. This "learned helplessness" limits their potential more than any external obstacle.

People's stories are familiar and make them feel safe, even if their tales also make them miserable. Blaming others for negative circumstance is an excuse for doing nothing about them. Modern workplace wisdom says that listening to employee complaints is important. But too much listening only magnifies and reinforces employees' belief in learned helplessness. The antidote to the victim mind-set is "personal accountability." Psychologists have found that perfection doesn't lead to happiness; happiness derives from taking responsibility for what happens in your life.

## Fact from Fiction

Quit "arguing with reality." Often the stories you believe are worse than the facts. Perhaps the sales office sent in a new order but neglected to include necessary information, so the order is incomplete. Missing data doesn't have a hidden meaning; information is just facts. But you start thinking that the salespeople are too lazy to do their jobs and that you have to pick up their slack; your mood and mind-set sour. Motivated by anger, you're likely to be unhelpful, unproductive and rude.

> "Our stories come from a deep inner voice of doubt that we owe it to ourselves to question."

To determine what you believe, begin by listing the facts you know about the situation. Are the salespeople really lazy? They sold something, so somebody's working. Who do you – as a manager or an employee – become in your story if you choose to believe it? If there is no story, how can you remedy the problem of the missing data? If you are convinced your story is right, you might send the order back to sales, delaying it. That means the customer will suffer for the sake of your self-satisfaction. Or you could deal with the facts, and not the story, by just calling the sales department to request the missing information. That's a win-win outcome. Take your story out of the mix and what remains are the facts plus two questions: "How can I help?" and "What is the very next thing I can do to add value right now?"

## Ego and Its Discontents

Your world mirrors your attitudes. If you're in a hurry at a store, you'll scowl and be abrupt. Little wonder, then, that you will perceive other people as grumpy or unhelpful. When you smile, your experience of others will reflect that friendliness. Everyone participates in the creation of his or her own reality. What you judge to be missing in a situation is likely what you need to provide.

> "These voices waste our time and cause us to feel helpless, and they stop us from moving forward productively and getting the results we want."

Ego is not the same as confidence. The ego mediates your perception of your reality while trying to fulfill your desires. The ego loves drama and always wants to be the star in your story. If the story's all about you, your ego calls the shots. It takes humility to realize that your ego is not the best guide. A humble servant-leader thinks the best of others and keeps an open mind. Unmasking ego-motivated behavior is difficult, especially when you believe that you are entirely unselfish. If you worry that others won't like your decisions, your ego is running the show. Ego causes you to waste energy trying to prove you're right so everyone will support you and approve of you. Never mind being right; your goal should be succeeding in your job.

> "If I believe you are uncommunicative, I withhold communication. If I see you as hostile, I respond with hostility. Model the behavior you want to see."

The best decisions are based on facts without an emotional charge. Give up being right – even if you don't get the results you want. Be open to an impartial account of the steps that led to your results, and learn from them. Even negative feedback offers opportunities for growth. Successful companies are open, flexible and always learning; that's what makes them fun places to work.

## Manager Versus Leader

Act as a leader, not a manager. Leaders provide an overall vision of success and empower employees to take specific roles on a team. Managers are usually too busy putting out fires to look at the big picture. As a leader, your goal is to develop autonomy and confidence in your people. Have faith that they will figure things out for themselves, and clearly affirm that you expect them to do so. Help them see how to succeed no matter what the circumstances. Minimize drama by enabling employees to separate their emotional stories from the facts.

> "What if, on the other hand, the worst-case scenario is true?"

Any argument that pits one person's word against another's is a trap. Don't get caught up in the story. Instead, coach the person who came to you. You two are the only ones sharing the present moment. Make yourself the "go-to" person who asks questions that shed light on the decision-making process. To build employee confidence, teach your staffers to answer their own questions. Greater confidence means greater competence.

## "Emotional Blackmail"

When people try to manipulate you through your insecurities, that's "emotional blackmail." They might say, "This is not the way things used to be," or "You haven't brought up this issue before." Don't take the bait. Focus on a more productive dialogue. Say: "While that has been the standard in the past, here is how I would like you to do things now," or "This is true, and while we could focus on that, I would prefer to focus on what will bring us the best results." Ask questions such as "What are you trying to achieve?" and "What's your plan to achieve it?" If you're not sure how best to respond, use a stock neutral statement such as "I see," or "Let me think about that."

> "Drama is ultimately the result of a lack of clear leadership."

Employee surveys let workers who lack a sense of personal accountability complain about their less-than-perfect circumstances. These surveys add fuel to the idea that a worker's poor performance is due somehow to the work environment or a lack of resources. When you ask employees for recommendations, you can also ascertain their accountability. For example, to learn more about their motivation, ask employees to make one request that would improve their circumstances and three things they would be willing to do to get it fulfilled.

## "Work with the Willing"

Don't knock yourself out trying to make miserable people happy. Focus on team members who are inspired to improve themselves, those who work toward the firm's overall goals. Not every employee adds equal value to the company, so trying to treat everyone "fairly" ignores reality. Holding the hands of subpar performers is a disservice to them and the firm. Set your standards objectively, but set them high and hold employees accountable. Reward those who achieve.

> "If you as a leader do not embrace reality...those you lead will not know how to invest the precious resources of their time and energy."

Some 20% of the employees in any given workforce are self-starters who enjoy work and add value. Another 20% dislike their jobs and resist every step toward progress. The 60% in between are in "maintenance" mode, doing only what they must to avoid being fired. However, this maintenance group often picks up the slack for the underperforming 20%.

## Reward or Fire

Remember that 60% of your workforce could go either way. Reward them by lightening their load and firing the people you should fire instead of spending fruitless energy trying to turn them around. Focusing on those who underperform shows the 60% that negativity draws your attention. That discourages your well-performing top 20%, who might look for work elsewhere. "Play favorites." When you reward those who add value to the business, others get the message.

> "If you subscribe to the idea that everyone's opinion has to count, in effect you are handing out veto power to the majority while only a minority has the power to say 'yes'."

Acknowledge your role in co-creating a difficult employee. Don't ignore those who resist. Show them what their behavior costs the organization. Establish short, structured meetings in which you hold employees accountable for their performance. These meetings, which provide the necessary forum to encourage better behavior, minimize the time staffers need to demonstrate that they can meet your expectations. If an employee still falls short, you will have ample justification and documentation for firing him or her, and it won't come as a shock.

## "Bulletproof Employees"

When companies change – no matter how public and complete the planning – employees are surprised. Surprise leads to panic, and panicked people will look to place blame. Ignore that inevitable reaction and welcome change. Defend any challenges from employees simply by saying that their opinion is "good to know." This sort of neutral statement will help defuse the constrictive thoughts that change can inspire. A "Reality-Based Leader" responds to change with flexibility and capitalizes on new opportunities. Choose your reaction: Decide on success. Change is a great opportunity for learning. To focus on its lessons and restrict its damage, teach your employees to be bulletproof and impervious to its difficulties.

> "It always takes less energy to have a legitimate confrontation than it does to keep avoiding it."

Gather your employees and ask them to state their concerns. Write these "risks" down as you go around the room. Explain that minimizing risk is the job at hand. Prioritize the outcomes that worry you in terms of high, medium or low probability. Work on the high and medium risks first, and ask your group to brainstorm strategies to manage them. Remember, competency follows confidence. Commit to a course of action, and the learning and challenges it entails. That dedication builds the competence required to succeed. Move quickly to resolve your concerns. Do not become mired in drama or hypothetical situations. That is not productive. Working within your current constraints to design a solution that elegantly serves multiple needs is the best form of "thinking inside the box."

> "When you work with a group of willing people – no matter how small – you will start to get results that make believers of others."

In high-pressure situations, leaders often make the mistake of saying that a new challenge will be easy to overcome. In other words, they lie. Other mistakes include reacting to anger with anything other than a neutral response or withdrawing support as soon as the challenge is overcome. The more you build flexibility into your teams and the better you plan ahead for genuine crises, the more ready your team will be to handle change.

## Reality-Based Teams

Some of your workplace beliefs may be keeping you from the results you want. Get over them! Surmount them! For instance, forget the idea that your employees' opinions all carry equal value. Your office is not a democracy. Unless someone's opinion would help finalize your own decision, don't ask for it. Plans and choices will never be perfect. If you are faced with an opinion you dislike or a directive with which you disagree, loyalty demands that you try your best to implement it as instructed. Tell your team to do the same. "Reality-Based Leaders" are open to new information that might improve a current plan, but they need employees who execute decisions, not those who offer opinions.

> "To get your team staged for success, first communicate a clear and compelling vision about what is possible."

Abandon accepted business wisdom like "There is no I in Team," and "Don't bring me a problem without also coming armed with a solution." Your goal is to guide your employees to take personal accountability. Each person should be responsible for his or her contributions to a team effort. They should not bring problems to you that they could solve. Bear in mind that those in the best position to perceive a problem are not necessarily those best positioned to solve it.

> "Profits are the result of personally accountable bulletproof employees who make trust a conscious decision."

Freezing up and hunkering down in hard times is human nature, but survivors know that "waiting for clarity" can be deadly. Clarity emerges from action. Clearly define your team members' roles and the team's overall goals. Provide a vision of the future that inspires your team. Delegate. Encourage your staffers to develop their talent and leadership qualities. The most productive question your team can ask is "How can I help?"

# About the Author

Speaker, workshop trainer and consultant **Cy Wakeman** blogs for FastCompany.