

Leaders in Search of Magic

Before every take of a scene, legendary actor Jack Lemmon would whisper to himself, "It's Magic Time."ⁱ Some suggest it was his way of giving focus to his effort to transform a character into a believable performance. It must have worked, as Lemmon won 2 Oscars and 52 awards while receiving some 41 nominations as an actor.

Throughout his career, it was Lemmon's way of putting himself in the Magic Zone for performance. This highly educated man with average appearance could take a role or character and cause an audience to believe he was someone else. His ability to influence others stood the test of time as he was able to work with some of the leading directors, actors, and actresses of his day while being loved by fans.

Isn't it interesting that we still search for the Magic Zone?

Physicians look for magic in being able to perform a delicate surgery that will bring healing and wholeness back to a patient's life.

Teachers look for magic in being able to present units of study that can help children learn basic skills that will go with them the rest of their lives.

Coaches look for magic in putting a diverse group of individuals together into a cohesive group that can win games.

Leaders search for this same elusive quality on a regular basis. Whether it is the CEO of the company or a front line supervisor, everyone is looking for the special spark that will generate the best outcome. The desire is to make a project, plan, or deadline believable to the point employees will buy into it and support it with their best effort.

Unfortunately, this longing for the right formula for success can lead to some very unhealthy practices.

Magic Lost

For years, the American financial system was founded on Wall Street and a sound banking system. With the revelations of greed, compromise, and questionable decision making, all of us have seen how faulty this magical formula really was.

In addition, inflated home prices balanced with dubious loan practices have opened our eyes to the reality that even banks had cast a spell of false hope on millions. How many families have lost their homes to foreclosure?

Is Wall Street or the banking system to blame? Not entirely. In a sense we all must bear some responsibility. We placed blind trust in institutions. Many wanted immediate benefits without centering the long-term effect. We all now realize that institutions are not any stronger than the people who lead them.

We looked for fast fortune at the expense of lasting values.

In a sense, the magic is gone. There aren't any formulas, incantations, or spells that will remove the cloud of grief, loss, and despair that has hovered over our country in recent years.

Magic Redefined

Yet, we aren't without hope. We still need magic.

We need leaders today who will give strong direction and guidance to our businesses and organizations. We need people with solid character who will do the right thing because it is the right thing to do no matter what.

So, it begs the question. How do leaders get the magic back?

I don't know the answer, but I do have some specific ideas.

Here are some to consider:

First, face the pain.

Listen to the pain around you. People's lives and institutional credibility have been shattered. The American Dream has crumbled because we now realize that you can work hard, do the best you can, and yet barely survive.

The pain can be a great teacher. Lean into the pain, and let it offer lessons of life and leadership.

Second, lose the magical thinking.

There aren't any incantations, potions, or formulas that will suddenly and instantly change the situation. No one person possesses all knowledge. No one institution owns all truth. There aren't any silver bullets. There aren't any leaders who can leap tall buildings with a single bound, outrace speeding locomotives, or stop bullets with their chest. Superman could. We can't.

Third, dig down.

Get back to the roots of values and character. When the storms of life come (as they always will), the storm will reveal the root system upon which the person or the institution has built life. The storm becomes the great teacher and revealer at the same time.

Fourth, realize that leadership hasn't changed.

True leadership is about people building strong relationships based upon trust and credibility. This foundation provides leaders the opportunity to influence people in positive ways to make a difference in their lives and in the organization as well. This hasn't changed. It never will.

Fifth, stop looking at the storm, and start looking at your life.

Recently a friend watched a segment of a Suzie Ormond show. Her summary of the information being presented was all related to financial planning. Here is my friend's summary: "If you will take care of your financial self it doesn't matter what the economy does or does not do."

I find a lot of wisdom in this statement because it has application to leadership as well. Here is my thought. If you will look at yourself as a leader, stay true to your character and values, and practice healthy communication and relationship skills, it doesn't matter what the storms of life may bring. You will still be true to yourself. You will be giving your best effort to help people. You will be maintaining relationships and communication in a healthy manner.

To me, that is the magic.

I do believe in magic. I believe in the magic that occurs when leaders takes ownership of their gifts, talents, experiences, and abilities in a way that allows them to create the credibility needed to gain support and buy-in from those who follow. I also believe being trustworthy isn't enough. I believe in the magic formula of developing those around you to the point that they can make a contribution as well.

We desperately need leaders today who can face changing economic times and stay true to the course as well as their values. Leadership isn't about hocus pocus, pixie dust, or magic wands. It is about committed people who choose to use their potential in a positive way to change the people around them and the organizations they lead.

ⁱ Jack Lemmon: It's Magic Time, by [Karma Waltonen](http://www.matchflick.com/column/1870), <http://www.matchflick.com/column/1870>, accessed 01/13/2010.