

About the Authors

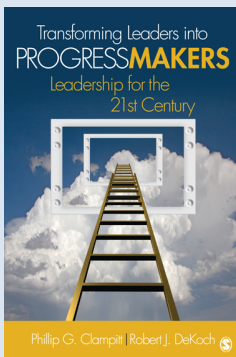
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Are You a Progress-Making Leader?

This white paper is based on excerpts from:

Transforming Leaders into Progress Makers: Leadership for the 21st Century



Progressmakers.net

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Are You a Progress-Making Leader?

What do Oprah Winfrey, Winston Churchill, King Solomon, and Lance Armstrong have in common? Not much, if you look at their temperaments, viewpoints, and passions. Yet, each has demonstrated the unique ability to define, make and sustain progress in their respective spheres of influence. And they maintained the progressive momentum during times of success and disappointment. How did they sustain a progressive energy in their organizations? A careful examination of the careers of these progress-making leaders, and other less celebrated ones, reveals three underlying competencies.

Progress makers envision the future with calculated boldness

When words like “boldness,” “courage,” and “bravery” crop up in a conversation, often the stories involve military commanders, officers, and troops. Daring exploits against daunting odds usually provide the main story line. Yet, the story tellers often neglect to mention an essential feature of most bold action, namely *calculation*, which helps to minimize risk and maximize the odds of victory. Clearly, there are times that too much calculation can lead to inaction (e.g. analysis paralysis). But progress makers rarely fall into that trap. In fact, progress makers see calculation as strengthening boldness. Winston Churchill put it best when he said, “*To try to be safe everywhere is to be strong nowhere.*” And that principle guided his toughest war-time decisions.

The synonyms for calculation and boldness clash. Calculating leaders act with deliberation, design, and planning. Bold leaders act with audacity, courage and daring. Overly-calculating leaders hesitantly budge their organizations forward. Overly-bold leaders impetuously jump to a new direction. Progress makers seek out the sweet spot between the overly timid and overtly brash. They find the synergy between the two extremes by acting boldly when the right conditions prevail. They attack like cyclist Lance Armstrong does on the mountain stages of the Tour de France. He doesn’t attack, attack, attack. He realizes that this supreme athletic challenge is more like a chess game than a full-throttle sprint. Consequently, he calculates the optimum time to stage an attack by sensing potentially decisive vulnerabilities of an opponent. Then he attacks with an astonishing degree of vigor and aggressiveness. That’s what it takes to win the yellow jersey of the Tour de France seven times.

Progress makers cultivate a focused flexibility mindset in others

King Solomon admonished us to “Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise.”¹ Are we to pay attention to the ant’s work ethic? Definitely. Are we to emulate the management structure of the ant hill? Perhaps. But the wise King may be asking us to look at something even deeper. As two scientists observed, “By maintaining pheromone trails and continuously exploring new paths, the ants serendipitously set up

a backup plan and thus are prepared to respond to changes in their environment.”² Ants have a remarkable ability to quickly forget old pathways and switch roles as the needs of the swarm change. In other words, ants practice “focused flexibility;” they *focus* on present needs while maintaining the *flexibility* to meet future ones.

Oprah Winfrey, for instance, started her career in the news business. Yet in relatively short order, she established her first major platform with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. That was only the beginning. In the spirit of a progress maker, she went on to establish other successful platforms including Harpo Studios, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network. When Oprah announced that she was ending her TV show many devoted fans were saddened, some dismayed and others completely bewildered. But that decision, too, represents the spirit of a progress maker. Why? Progress makers know when a particular platform (e.g. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*) has run its course and when it’s time to devote energy to other endeavors (e.g. The Oprah Winfrey Network.)³

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Maintaining both focus and flexibility tests the progress-making abilities of even the most skilled leaders. It means developing an ability to quickly inspire others to shift focus with little loss in productivity. It means teaching employees to partially forget the old ways of doing things while maintaining those memories in case they are needed in the future. Leaders are more likely to lament “knowledge loss” than they are to praise purposeful forgetting. Memories get embedded in organizational processes, procedures, and systems. That makes them all the more difficult to forget.

Focused flexibility requires that organizations celebrate present success but not be overly influenced by it, remember the right things and forget others and quickly stabilize even as they continue to innovate. In short, it requires a set of seemingly contradictory qualities that a super-organism, such as an ant hill, displays.

Progress makers enlarge the circle of engagement through collaborative communication

Effective leaders develop an intuitive sense about when their team needs to move beyond the status quo. Sometimes their team is stuck in a rut and requires new blood to move on. At other times, the team has an uptick in energy, sensing some vague but significant turning point. Progress makers seize these moments by asking probing questions, providing thoughtful advice, adding new team members, allocating new resources, shifting the organizational structure, or even developing a new business alliance. It is a quest to prod their organizations beyond the tipping point into genuine value-adding endeavors. Progress makers sense and seize these unique moments of acceleration.

Enlarging the circle of engagement means bringing new ideas, talents and resources into the fold. That's not enough, though. Progress makers know how to translate synergistic potential into synergistic results. Their principal tool is collaborative communication designed for *building critical relationships* and *enriching ideas*. Both skills are essential to progress. Yet, all too often teams unconsciously choose one at the expense of the other. For instance, some people build relationships by essentially turning off their critical-thinking skills. They gloss over important differences with soothing words and equivocal agreements.

Effectively enlarging the circle of engagement requires collaboration which emerges from three interrelated skills:

- *Exploring and respecting differences.* When Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft collaborated on a software project, tensions arose because of differences in their perspectives, skill-sets and business models.⁴ The impasse was eventually bridged by documenting and discussing perceived differences between the cultures. One result was a statement about the respective strengths of both companies.
- *Promoting a spirit of inquiry.* Like all other forms of discourse, questions can be used for good or ill. Questions promoting inquiry are carefully crafted to release the collective critical thinking of a team. For example, asking, "What assumptions are we making?" often provokes a more thoughtful discussion about key decisions.⁵ Likewise, inquiring about underlying patterns can often help ferret out important trends. Progress makers know the often subtle difference between asking questions that prompt posturing (e.g. "Who's fault is this one?") and those that promote inquiry (e.g. "What happened in this case?").
- *Encouraging employees to express doubt.* Our research involving over 1000 employees has determined that organizations that embrace doubt and uncertainty engender more employee satisfaction, commitment and buy-in to organizational decisions. Employees in uncertainty-embracing organizations are better able to cope with change than their counterparts in uncertainty-suppressing organizations. This pattern emerged regardless of how employees rated their personal abilities to manage doubt and uncertainty.⁶ A collaborative team creates an uncertainty-embracing climate by allowing employees to freely express concerns and challenge decisions.

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In essence, a collaborative communication style means that leaders have the ability to look at issues from different perspectives. They seek consensus before deciding what to do and make sure most people are comfortable with the solution. Even when some irresolvable conflict emerges they might say something like, "Most of us agree. Can the

rest of you live with this decision?”⁷ Queries like this demonstrate the desire for collaboration and respect for others while signaling a need to move forward.

Conclusion

To some leaders our ideas about progress making imply seemingly contradictory counsel like “listen to your customers, but not too much;” “be confident, but not-overconfident;” and “act boldly but not too boldly.” Fair enough. Progress making is about creating a mind-set about the dangers of the extremes and being able to lean in the right direction at the proper time. Why is this an important ability? Because business scholars have consistently found that an organization’s ability to *exploit current successes* tends to undermine its ability to *explore for future successes*, and vice versa. Both *exploitation* and *exploration* are required to sustain progress over time. Managing the tensions between boldness and calculation, focus and flexibility, and collaboration and decisiveness allows the progress maker to navigate the tricky waters between *exploitation* and *exploration*.

In short, progress makers have thick skin and sensitive ears. Thick skin proves useful as leaders enlarge the circle because they will encounter criticism, often directed at their most cherished ideas. Likewise sensitive ears help progress makers calculate and focus as they discover underlying issues that can impede progress while being able to seize on notions that can propel their organizations forward. Such are the contrasting abilities of progress-making leaders like Oprah, Winston Churchill, and many of their less celebrated colleagues.

¹ Proverbs 6.6. (New Revised Standard Version).

² E. Bonabeau and G. Théraulaz, “Swarm Smarts.” *Scientific American*, March 2000, 73-79, p. 76.

³ “Brand Royalty.” *The Economist*. November 28, 2009, p.78.

⁴ J. Hughes and J. Weiss, “Simple Rules for Making Alliances Work.” *Harvard Business Review* 85(11) 2007: 122-131, p. 126.

⁵ See www.Phils7Questions.com

⁶ P. Clampitt and M. L. Williams, “Conceptualizing and Measuring How Employees and Organizations Manage Uncertainty.” *Communication Research Reports* 22 (2005): 315-324; K. Sweetman, “Embracing Uncertainty.” *MIT Sloan Management Review* 43(1) 2001: 8-9.

⁷ K. Lovelace, D. L. Shapiro, and L. R. Weingart, “Maximizing Cross-Functional New Product Teams’ Innovativeness and Constraint Adherence: A Conflict Communications Perspective.” *Academy of Management Journal* 44 (4) 2001: 779-793, p. 784.

Transforming Leaders into Progress Makers: Leadership for the 21st Century

Fact Sheet

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Publisher	Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA
Chapters, Pages	16, 254
Tables, Illustrations Website	16, 35 Progressmakers.net
Value Proposition	<p><i>Progress: the focus of a new perspective on leadership</i> Original research. Novel strategies and tactics. Stories of successful leaders. By weaving these elements together, this book provides insight into how to become a <i>progress-making</i> leader. Written by an academic and a business executive, the book provides actionable ideas grounded in sound research and tested in real organizations.</p>
Key Features	<p>The Progress Model: This framework shows how progress can be made by <i>exploring</i> (trying something new), <i>refining</i> (improving existing ways of doing business) and establishing <i>platforms</i> (a way of completing a task or providing a service).</p> <p>Demonstrates the clear link between strategy and tactics: Readers will see that while effective leaders focus on certain strategies, they may use a wide variety of tactics to implement each strategy.</p> <p>Progress Maker Profiles: The profiles summarize in-depth interviews with a successful coffee entrepreneur, a general in the U.S. Army, a newspaper editor-in-chief, and a <i>Fortune 500</i> executive. These leaders have moved their organizations forward by utilizing the Progress Model.</p>
Original Research	<p>The book features new leadership research including findings from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> interviews with over 50 leaders <input type="checkbox"/> surveys of over 1,000 employees about how their organizations manage uncertainty <input type="checkbox"/> surveys of over 200 employees about how their organizations manage errors
Intended audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Students of leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Executives, professionals and managers <input type="checkbox"/> Small business owners