

# The New Core of Leadership

**Q**uality has traditionally meant anything that's expensive. Cadillacs and Rolexes are considered quality items. So are Mont Blanc pens, but not Bics. The concept of quality has been warm, fuzzy, but everyone got it.

Yet, it was useless from a business sense. Then something happened in the early 1980s. Instead of just meaning "high end," a few manufacturers redefined quality to mean "meeting the needs of the customer."

In-depth interviews  
with leaders across  
industries reveal the  
essential qualities.

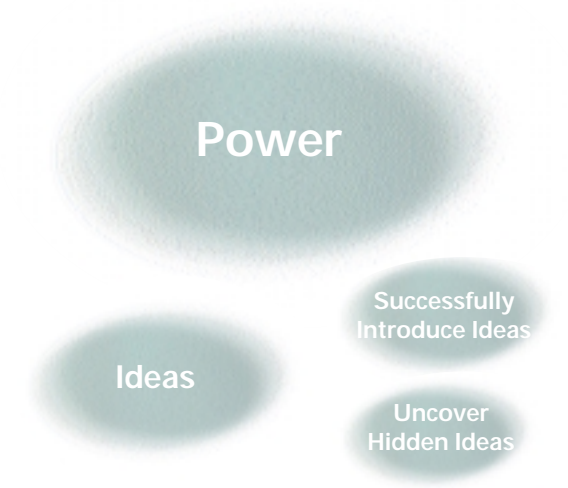
Customers could be either internal or external. Total quality management was born.

Incredibly, when companies from around the world came together to talk about quality, they now talked about the same thing, and they could learn from each other how to solve implementation problems. The knowledge base around quality deepened quickly. Product designers had to start listening to customers. Consistency across a manufacturing process became critical, spawning the discipline of Six Sigma. Speed became king, prompting work into A delta T.

This new concept of quality was strongly supported, and strongly invested in, by managers, CEOs, even U.S. Presidents. The high-potential people, rather than staff, were put in charge of the programs. When TQM tried to move into the dynamic services world, it sputtered. Still, it remains essential in manufacturing circles.

Compare that to the current state of leadership. Getting two advocates to agree on a definition of *leadership* seems impossible. Covey, Blanchard, PDI, DDI, Kotter, and AchieveGlobal (just to name a few) compete tooth-and-nail. Many consultants have tried (and failed) to turn leadership into a cookbook-style skill, handing out recipes for anyone to follow. Meanwhile, thousands of academics have heaped layers of philosophical debate that make leadership undefinable, almost magical. David Gergen, director of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, worries, "Had Roosevelt and Churchill not rallied the Western democracies, civilization might have perished." That sets the leadership bar high for the rest of us, without helping us know how they did it.

Now, so it seems, everything good is due to leadership and everything bad is due to lack of leadership. That generalization has led many people to think (wrongly) what one manager from a pharmaceutical



company recently told me: "Leadership has to be found or hired. It cannot be nurtured, taught, or developed."

But, in fact, the leadership planets may finally be aligning. Across the wealth of content out there, a common consensus about leadership is emerging. Experts may disagree on the fringes, but they're remarkably aligned on the core. Like quality, leadership is usable, diagnosable, and, yes, teachable.

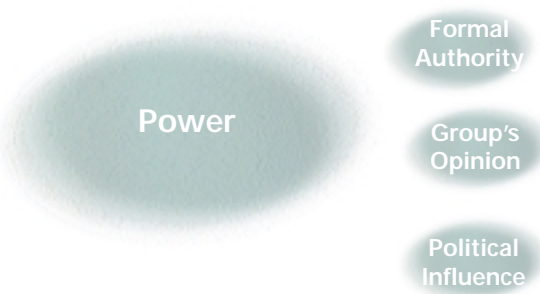
This article is a result of a series of interviews over six months in the middle of 2000 with people identified as leaders within their organizations, including senior people, mid-level managers, and line workers, as well as people from the private sector and government. The interviews were preparation for developing SimuLearn's *Virtual Leader* leadership simulation.

Power

When all is said and done, leadership is accomplishment. Consider AlliedSignal turnaround executor Larry Bossidy, whose bestselling *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* serves as a timely reminder of the importance of leadership accomplishment. And GE's Jack Welch said it characteristically succinctly when he was recruiting: "I was really looking for people who were filled with passion and a desire to get things done."

But leadership isn't being satisfied with just completing assigned work. That's management. Few leaders can work in a vacuum. Therefore, a de facto definition of leadership is "getting a group of people to productively complete the right work."

Formal authority. To get a group to move in the



same direction, the leader must have power. It can be formal authority, such as a title or credentials. Some leaders try to heighten their perceived authority by name dropping or by obtaining various and new certifications.

**Informal authority.** Power can also be in the form of informal authority, such as the friendship or alignment of others. It's critical not to underestimate a group's opinion of you. Hedrick Smith, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former *New York Times* correspondent, noted, "Jack Kennedy was the first successful presidential candidate to rely on personal appeal to win the top prize." Breaking trust, not walking one's talk, is one of the fastest ways to lose informal authority.

**Political influence.** Power even takes the form of political influence, earned from coming up with good ideas or being on the winning side of arguments. As professional hockey player Wayne Gretzky famously said, "You want to skate to where the puck will be, not where it is." U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice recently summed up the goal of power: "Power is nothing unless you can turn it into influence."

Leadership requires gaining power, but also sharing power. One of the most effective acts of leadership committed by Lyndon B. Johnson was to identify and praise Martin Luther King Jr. at the national level. Sharing power instead of applying it is how, in the words of Peter Block, author of *The Empowered Manager*, "one can demand commitment instead of sacrifice."

### Ideas

Leaders have to focus a group on the right work. That's seldom easy. Because a group often doesn't know what the right work is at first, leaders have to uncover hidden ideas, such as through brainstorming. Mary Anne Devanna and Eliza Collins wrote in *The New Portable MBA* that "the creation of vision comes from a considerable amount of exploring, analyzing, and rooting around in the territory of the problem."

But it can be much simpler. Sir Winston Churchill said, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." Gerry Spence, the famed trial lawyer in the fringed suede jacket, agrees: "If I were required to choose the single essential skill from the many

that make up the art of argument, it would be the ability to listen."

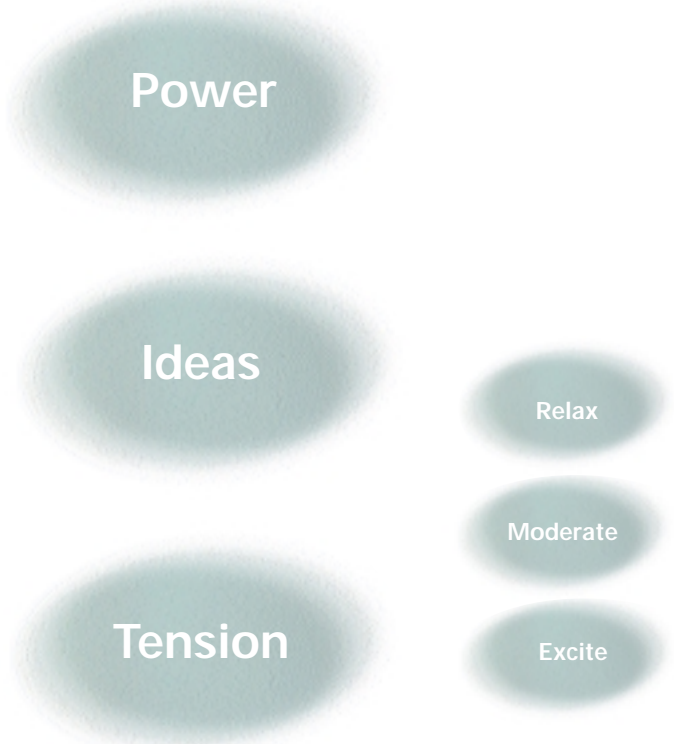
Generating ideas requires sensitivity to the environment and individuals. Some people are their most creative when they're relaxed. In a newspaper interview, Paul McCartney described how he wrote the song "Yellow Submarine" in bed just before dropping off to sleep. Other people are most creative when tense. Says Motorola's Gary Tooker, "There's nothing like the sight of the gallows to clear the mind."

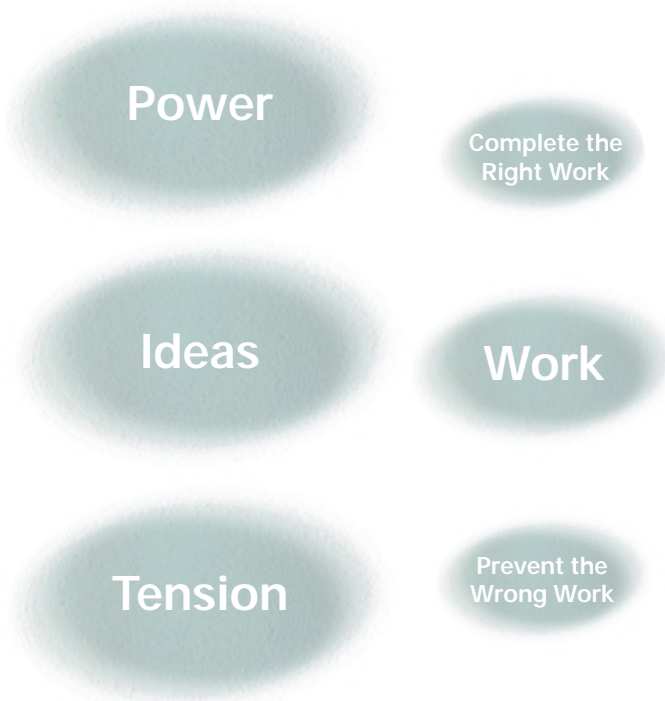
Part of a leader's judgment has to be which idea-generation strategy to use for which people—and when to be satisfied with the number of ideas that are on the table.

### Tension

To get people to a productive, working state, leaders must moderate tension. When people are too relaxed, they're hard to motivate; when they're too tense, they tend to focus more on themselves than the task at hand.

Anne Mulcahy, chairman and CEO, Xerox Corporation, says it well: "When times are good, you should talk about what needs improvement. When things are bad, you should assure people that things will get better."





**Commitment**

Gaining power, generating ideas, and moderating tension can be done in any order, or even at the same time. The leader has to work with his or her group to evaluate the ideas. Hedrick Smith reminds us on the need to focus when he said, “The capacity of any president to lead depends on focusing the country’s political attention and energies on two or three top priorities.”

Then, a leader uses what he or she has built to get the work done. In some cases, leaders spend all of their power, at least temporarily, to keep people focused. They have to discard some great ideas. Tension may spike. But when the right work is completed, all involved get a windfall.

**Balance**

One of the big payoffs of understanding leadership is seeing how many people have bad habits for using selective, unbalanced versions of it.

Some people love power and will work towards gaining it for themselves as an end. Says Gerry Spence, “Many in positions of power take up such posts in the fulfillment of a neurotic need to exercise power over others.”

One reason power hoarding is ineffective is that sharing power is essential for generating ideas. Many lower-level employees who have great ideas but little

political capital, informal authority, or formal authority won’t introduce their ideas for fear of having them shot down.

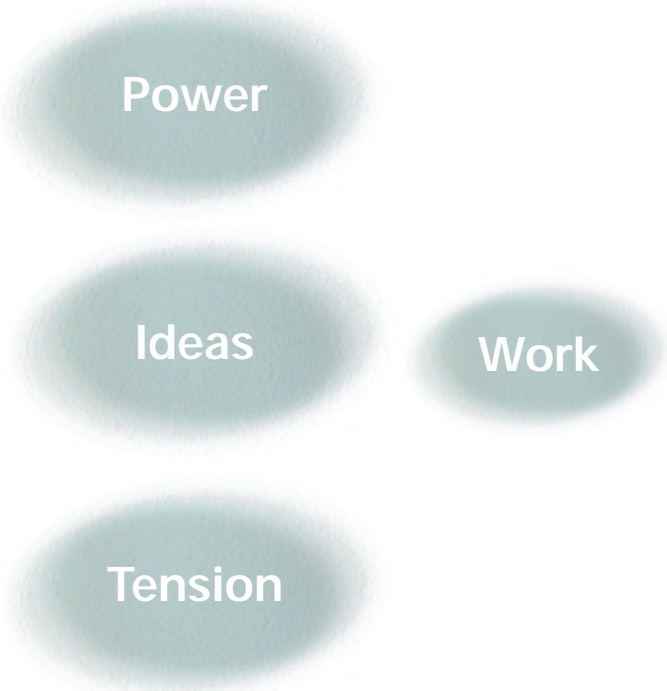
David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox, sums up everyone’s necessary mindset: “If I participate in creating the change, I’m going to understand it better, and I am going to have ownership.”

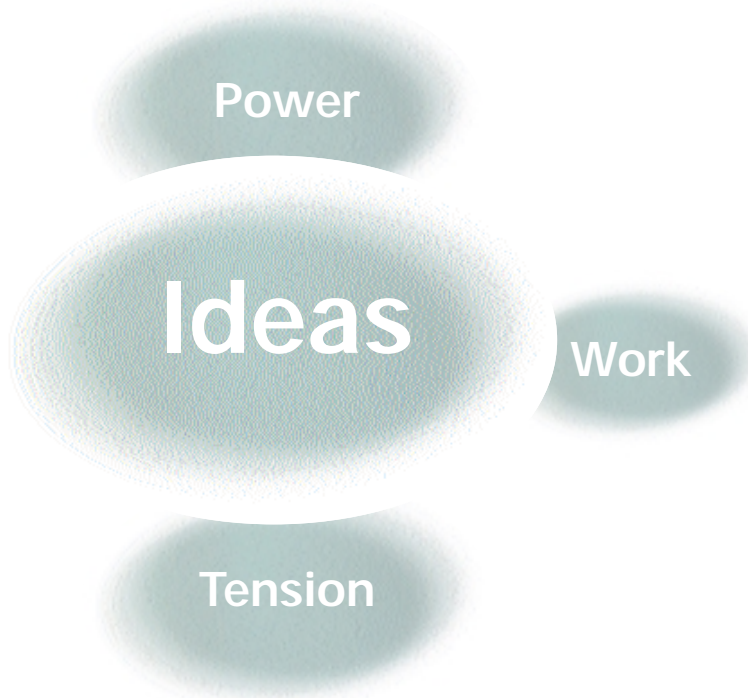
The power grabbers don’t realize intuitively that each time they miss a leadership opportunity to help a group complete the right work, their power actually ebbs. We’ve all seen people grow increasingly manipulative trying to over-compensate for a lack of results.

Some people are constantly lowering or raising tension; others epitomize calm in their speech and manner, relaxing everyone around them. Such people are never angry. Others are whirlwinds, making everyone around them uncomfortable. Sometimes those people are perfect for a particular situation. But to apply tension strategies indiscriminately ensures misuse.

Some people see their value as coming up with new ideas. They bring up one, then another, then another. They switch between ideas. These leaders see their ascension as the direct result of coming up with the right ideas. Others might view them as flaky and unfocused.

I’ve known people who view their day as a failure unless they produce something—anything. I’ve talked to more than a few new managers in a software divi-





sion of a computer company. I'd ask, "How was your day?" They'd respond, "Terrible. All I did was talk to people all day. I didn't get anything done."

Other people, especially corporate staffers, will do a perfect setup but never pull the trigger on any project. They'd rather perpetually analyze than commit. I increasingly see entire organizations represent unbalanced leadership, and so squander their potential. One of the best examples of balance is a simple combustion engine, such as in a lawn mower or motorcycle. Engines need fuel, air, and a spark in the right combination to work. You can't use excessive amounts of one element to compensate for lack of another.

### Practice

Leadership requires strategy. Honing that strategy takes practice to make it intuitive. The good news is that you can practice leadership skills every day—at a staff meeting, in a one-on-one meeting with a manager, or when plotting the course of your entire company or career. Most important, leadership isn't just for leaders. Leadership skills are essential for everyone.

Leadership will help anyone rise above the fray and see and influence the larger patterns of power, tension, ideas, and commitment to work.

When Gergen praised his boss's performance, he did it this way: "Reagan was as good that day as he'd ever

been in meetings. He stayed above the forest of facts we provided and focused on the larger goals he wanted to pursue."

Hedrick Smith noted, "The real pros usually have a pretty good feel for how certain policy lines and maneuvers will play out, before they start." Lou Gerstner, when he arrived at IBM, calmed down some people, revved up others. He fired some people because they were too nice. He got ideas. Many IBMers remarked that they were impressed that he actually read their emails. Gerstner also listened to customers and analysts. He solidified his power, then committed to courses of action that he methodically executed.

### Leadership: the next TQM

Leadership, a set of dynamic skills, is harder than TQM, a process skill. According to Pedro Mata, former president of Grace Cocoa, the framework for leadership is "an easy concept but to be able to apply it in real-life situations needs practice."

Leadership requires timing, intuition, and personalization. It's about the when and the how, not just the what. It's about leveraging relationships, not rules. It's a much more critical skill than quality. The payoff in all environments to bring together rigor and control with creativity and empowerment can transform lives, enterprises, and industries. We have the opportunity to foster and instill a new genre of leadership as part of our personas and corporate cultures. To bring it into our organizations, we now have to role model, not just mandate, leadership. TD

*Clark Aldrich is the lead designer of SimuLearn's Virtual Leader simulation; [www.simulearn.net](http://www.simulearn.net). Aldrich launched Gartner's e-learning coverage before leaving to do some critical work and spent years studying leadership at the academic and corporate levels. He first learned about quality and leadership during the three years he was the speechwriter for Wayland Hicks, executive vice president of Xerox, who was written about most extensively in American Samurai and was credited with the success of Xerox during the early 1990s. Three years after Hicks left, Xerox lost 90 percent of its market value. Aldrich can be reached at [clark.aldrich@att.net](mailto:clark.aldrich@att.net).*