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The New Leadership Equation: Five Core Ingredients

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After nearly 40 years working in the field of aging/gerontology, I've come to believe there are five key ingredients for becoming and remaining a leader in this -- and perhaps any -- arena.

First, you must have a forward-facing vision and mission.

You've got to imagine how you'd like things to be, how to get there and what roles others will need to play to realize that vision. Your ideas must be compelling enough for people to want to take that trip with you. Backward-facing vision may be fascinating and make for an insightful historical perspective, but forward-facing vision is a requirement.

And you must cultivate excellent communication skills. In a less media-engaged era, you might have been able to carry on by teaching a college course or publishing a timely study. That's not enough anymore. Today, you have to be a persuasive multimedia communicator. Some people think effective communication is a natural talent. I disagree: you can learn how to get better, you can improve with practice and there are classes, workshops and coaches that can leapfrog you forward.

When I became involved in trying to spread the word about a new image of aging, I started taking courses in selling. I doubt there's ever been a course at an American Society on Aging or a Gerontological Society meeting on how to be a persuasive person, but in the field of life insurance and home realty, they know how to sell. So I signed up for many programs in those sectors to hone my skills as a persuasive communicator in the gerontology field.

Second, your content must be airtight.

When you are vetted by the White House or to speak in front of world leaders, CEOs or executives in important professional fields and your facts are wrong -- it's over. And, whatever your field is, you need to be just as knowledgeable about other points of view as your own. Do your homework and know what you're talking about--which includes admitting what you're not sure of.

Years ago, I didn't think I understood the history of aging well enough, so I reached out to Dr. Andy Achenbaum -- the country's leading expert -- and asked him to tutor me. He graciously agreed. He offered up a vast panorama of big ideas to me--and I've been grateful (and better informed) ever since.

Third, be prepared to course correct.

No matter who you are or what path you're on, you'd probably benefit from ongoing course corrections and good editing. This requires a willingness to continually learn new things and adjust your orientation.

Around 25 years ago, Monsignor Chuck Fahey, an elder leader in the field of aging, and I were sitting on a panel together at a conference. Father Fahey turned to me and initiated a serious discussion about the importance of the civil rights movement and the kind of caring values and morals that needed to form the foundation of the field of aging. He made some important points that I hadn't fully considered. At that moment, I was just completing work on my eighth book, *Age Wave*. After the talk with Fahey, my views had shifted and I decided to rewrite the whole book.

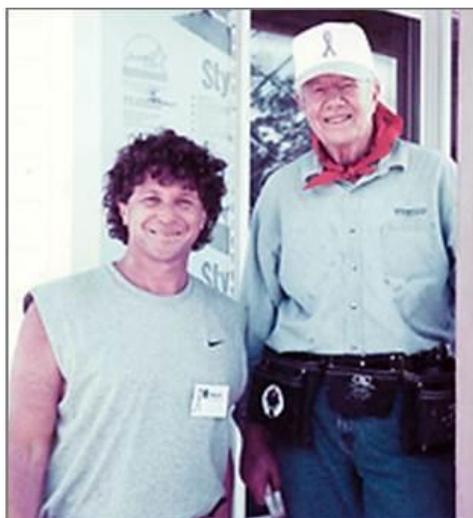
Which leads me to my fourth point: have mentors.

I don't know how anybody can become a leader in any field without mentors. And don't be afraid to reach high. The most influential gerontology-related mentors to me were Maggie Kuhn -- Founder of the Gray Panthers, and Dr. Robert Butler, Founding Director of the National Institutes on Aging.

However, many of my mentors are from the worlds of business and politics. I was once asked to give a speech at Georgia Southwest State University and they had no funding for a speaker. The program was sponsored by Rosalyn Carter's Caregiving Institute. I asked if, in lieu of a fee, I could have dinner with the President and Mrs. Carter. President Carter had been called out of town, so I spent a wonderful evening one-on-one with Mrs. Carter. The next day, during my speech about older adults and volunteerism, I turned to the audience and said, "Mrs. Carter, when you speak to your husband, please tell him I've got a job for him because we need to create a global elder corps." Everybody laughed.

But two weeks later, my phone rang and a voice said, "Ken, this is Jimmy Carter. I hear you've got a job for me." We decided to make an exchange. He wanted to write a book about aging -- *The Virtues of Aging* -- and he thought I could help him (which I surely tried to do). In exchange, I asked him to share his spiritual and humanitarian values. I wanted to be influenced by him. Our exchanges had a profound impact on my life.

You don't always get a U.S. president to be your mentor. It could be your work supervisor. It could be an industry colleague or client. It could be your mom. It could be one of your students.



Ken Dychtwald with President Jimmy Carter at a Habitat for Humanity project, 1997.

Fifth, and last, you need a strong will and a strong heart.

Being a leader can sometimes be tough. While there will be moments of affirmation, even acclaim, you will also be challenged and disagreed with (sometimes fiercely), and you will be disappointed. Some things that you're hoping will happen will crash and burn. Some days you'll get up and say things that you think are brilliant -- and people won't care a bit.

I strongly recommend you surround yourself with people who deeply care about you and about what you are doing -- but who will also tell you the truth -- because your pride, ideas and purpose will get wounded again and again. Being a leader on a complicated topic where you have to fight for the rights of other people is particularly competitive and challenging. Make sure you have support. Whether it's your faith or your community. In my case, it's been my wife, my children, my brother and my parents.

On the other hand, if you're wonderfully successful and you experience any fame, you may very well start drinking too much of your own Kool-Aid. Either way, be sure there are people who love you, who will be honest with you, and who will give you the support you need to go out and change the world!

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