In today’s ever morphing corporate world, the focus on and scrutiny of leaders is more prevalent than ever before from the boardroom, shareholders, or team members. Today’s leader is much more visible than ever before because of the way we share information and of course social media.

Organizations have invested billions of dollars in the recruitment and retention of their leadership population. Their aim is to ensure not only that their internal effectiveness is maintained but also their leaders’ public presence is aligned to the organization’s goals and values.

In my work as an executive coach and leadership development advisor, I found many individuals and organizations would surround themselves in intricate psychometric tests, models, and scorecards but were often too close to the business to evaluate themselves effectively and succinctly. I spent a number of years researching the most common attributes of great leaders, what were present and common between them. In doing so I developed a philosophy of leadership that was neither a product nor a model but simply a way of enhancing self-awareness—in a fun, scalable, and transferable way.

The philosophy was born while considering how I would share with a stuffy, dysfunctional CEO that he had some of these essential ingredients, too much of some, not enough of others—at the same time as my wife was baking a cake. As she was calling out her recipe, it dawned on me that the leaders who possessed essential ingredients could also be described as a cake. This CEO loved the concept and it helped him to develop his recipe. It was from here the philosophy of Leadership Cake was developed and I was inspired to share this through the book Leadership Cake.
The philosophy of Leadership Cake explores the principle that leadership is created like a cake; it’s a whole creation, born out of a list of ingredients, all of which are essential to create the perfect cake. The cake is a metaphor for you, and the ingredients and construction are you and your style. The recipe will help you focus on becoming a great leader. Get your ingredients, mixing, and baking right, and you are a great leader; get them wrong and your Cake can taste awful.

Recipe for “Cake”

When it comes to creating a recipe for leadership, there are about as many ideas as there are cookbooks for cakes, but there are some essential ingredients in your Leadership Cake that you can’t do without.

All cakes have essential ingredients. Most cakes need flour, eggs, water, and butter; otherwise it’s not a cake, right? Just as if you were baking a real cake, you can’t leave out the core ingredients in your Leadership Cake. We will discuss the Leadership Cake ingredients later, but where do we find the recipe so we at least know what to put into it?

I have experienced leadership in action when it works and when it does not. The recipe for success can often be found within our experience and those who were leaders before us.

My mother has a recipe for cake that my wife and children use today. It has been passed down over generations and adapted and modified based on experience, access to new ingredients, and the change in one’s palate. It’s also true that people’s taste and expectations may have been modified over time.

Leadership has evolved over time. There has been a visible and audible shift from a more dominant, directive, and autocratic leader to that of today’s leader, who is most likely to be better equipped, due to the changing and diverse corporate environment. There are leaders who we may have been viewed as role models 20 years ago who now seem outdated and stale because they haven’t updated their ingredients. If you have been dependent on a certain cookbook, it may well determine what your “Cake” tastes like. As bakers we want our consumers to enjoy cake. Bakers want to get feedback that their cake was pleasing to the palate. As leaders we want our outcomes and results to be received in the same way, particularly with how we operate or lead our people and businesses.

There are many leaders who have shone brightly in their business and personal achievements—you indeed may have worked with them in your past careers. If you consider any leader that has created the right environment for success, there are some common ingredients.

Is there such thing as the perfect leader or perfect Leadership Cake? Of course not! We are all susceptible to emotion, thinking, and feelings, and as such, we cannot be robotic in our actions. When faced with certain circumstances or events in our lives, we react. Our reaction will dictate our outcome to any event, so understanding what ingredients mix well with others is an essential element in baking the right kind of Leadership Cake.

Essential Ingredients for Leadership Cake

My mother uses a simple recipe that is generations old. Like all good cooks, she had adapted her cake mix to be the most effective yet simple to follow so she could deliver a great cake experience.

Because today’s leaders are challenged by lots of tasks, actions, and people to manage and to lead, I want
to break down the key ingredients. Although these four are essential, they are not the only ingredients; however, without them it’s not a Cake.

C - Communication  
A - Authenticity  
K - Knowledge  
E - Empathy

Communication

When you look at some of the world’s greatest leaders, one common ingredient they share is that they are all exceptional communicators. They have the ability to convey a resonant message and engage deeply and consistently with their audience.

The irony is that it is often the case that we are not taught to be great communicators during our early years. Early communication is a learned behavior taught to us by people around us, such as parents and siblings.

If they were good communicators, there is a likelihood of us being good communicators.

At school, we are taught grammar, punctuation, pronunciation, and vocabulary. If we were confident individuals, we may have been asked to share that in class, but all of these teach us just one approach: communication that focuses on what we do.

The greatest communicators in leadership have a sixth sense that also focuses on what others may do and how they do it while interpreting the reasons why.

I call these individuals “Communication Adaptors.” They have the ability in the blink of an eye to adapt their style, pace, or tone to vary the message based not on their message but on the person or group with whom they are communicating.

When I have worked with leaders who were communication adaptors, it was almost certain that they had less awkward or less confrontational experiences and dialogue. This was because they worked their communication skills with their recipient in mind. By adopting this approach, your recipient is likely to respond more positively.

Authenticity

Communication is essential to helping your authenticity. So is authenticity a choice? Is it a trait? I don’t think so.

Authentic behavior in leadership means unique or original. One of the easiest ways to mess up your Cake is by trying to sound or behave like somebody else or by mimicking a coworker. Authenticity is another core ingredient in our Leadership Cake mixture. Leaders became good leaders and good leaders became great leaders by learning “how to” from all of their interactions with people, in particular those leaders who inspired them.

What makes authentic leaders stand out from others is that everything they do they actually believe in wholeheartedly. They also demonstrate conviction in everything they say. This is all delivered with humility.

When leaders physically demonstrate humility and belief in what they say and do, they create instant trust and belief with their staff, stakeholders, and clients. If their followers didn’t believe what they said and did, it would smell like a 10-week-old cupcake.

We are simple and social human beings and we are programmed to smell rotten Cake from a mile away.

Direct reports of authentic leaders even put up with their failures for no other reason than that they trust their judgment. After all, your success as a leader is all about them delivering what you expect, right?

Here are some candy sprinkles for your “A” in Cake:  

\[(s + d) \times B = A\]

If you Say and Do what you genuinely Believe, you are Authentic.

Knowledge

In meetings and boardrooms, you may have heard that “knowledge is power.” Knowledge is at its most powerful when you or your businesses share that knowledge where appropriate. Occasionally when
A cake without eggs will be heavy, dense, and flat.

somebody has more knowledge than others, it can create a sense of technical hierarchy. In every organization, the broader the distribution of each team member’s knowledge, the better equipped the organization can be at responding with agility to different situations and scenarios.

Knowledge is an essential ingredient in your “Cake.” As a leader, you don’t have to be the subject matter expert. That is not what leadership knowledge is about.

To be effective, you will need a large range of information and knowledge at your fingertips if you want to improve results.

This means demonstrating to your direct reports sufficient information to be able to fully understand their business and communicate this knowledge effectively to the people you lead. It supports authenticity and empathy and is the perfect balancing ingredient in your Leadership Cake. It becomes easier for people to trust someone who understands them and the challenges within their business.

Unlocking this knowledge from your organization will be a byproduct of a well-baked Cake. Getting your business to share the collective knowledge pool will help you and results improve.

Empathy

Empathy in your Leadership Cake acts as the eggs in regular cake. It binds the other ingredients together. It will come as no surprise to you that without truly understanding the tasks, situations, and the people who create, execute and lead them, your own Leadership Cake is not really a Cake. A cake without eggs will be heavy, dense, and flat. It will break and crumble easily and not be very palatable, much like your Leadership Cake may taste without empathy. It’s ironic that empathy is an emotion that in past business eras was seen as a sign of weakness. It was seen as an emotion not appropriate in a strong leadership environment but has become a key ingredient in leadership and also in your basic Cake mix.

You have heard the saying, “birds of a feather, flock together”? So how do you build and develop empathy? It’s about finding out and understanding as much about the other person as possible. One way to get information is to give information first, such as family hobbies, and then ask, “so what about you?” Your role as an effective communicator is to then identify what synergies exist and share that common ground. The better affinity you have with another, the easier it is to understand and empathize with them.

As a leader, if you get feedback from others and take an educated guess at another’s point of view, your Leadership Cake will struggle, as your “E” Empathy ingredients will not be right. The only way to truly understand is by getting in it, leading with visibility and example by demonstrating a desire to truly learn what it’s like for the people you lead.

Before we finish baking a balanced yet basic Leadership Cake, don’t take the Cake out of the oven too late. If you do, it may spoil. Sympathy is what happens when you leave your Cake baking for too long. Empathy is essential; sympathy can be disastrous.

Sympathy …

Is about when you see a team member in a hole and you jump in with them. Now you are part of the problem.

Empathy …

Is about throwing them a ladder and helping them out.

Let Them Eat Cake

Although your Cake may taste just great right now, you can bet that some other leader’s Cake has a nice juicy filling or lovely sweet icing that could tempt your
most trusted and loyal staff away from you and your business. The fruit or creamy filling is a metaphor for personal development and this is in the very center of your Cake. Sharing your Leadership Cake with your team will help create a great, memorable experience and provide a differentiator between leaders.

Another trait demonstrated by great leaders is that they all are agile enough to develop and adapt in a changing world. Not only are they able to adapt their business acumen to the commercial world they operate in, they also demonstrate an ability to develop their knowledge, skills, and capabilities.

A byproduct of this leadership agility and self-awareness in developing themselves is that they also keep hold of the team of individuals that they lead—their direct reports. Great teams share consistency and longevity as they grow together. They learn from one another about the strengths they each possess. With the same agile leadership, the leader is able to maximize the team dynamics by playing to those strengths and capitalizing on the experience and styles of each team member.

Based on my research and in my experience, the greatest gift any leader can give is the gift of learning. The deeper and fuller your development ethos (your filling), the more palatable a leader you will be.

The Icing on Your Cake—Your Brand

When you visit an artisan cake shop and you look at the array of cakes on display, you’ll find an enormous variety to choose from. Even if you observed a few cakes that looked the same on the outside, there are subtle differences that make them unique.

As a leader, it’s the subtle differences that make you stand out. It’s the same subtle differences that make you more appealing to the eye than other Cakes or leaders, and that is down to how you carry yourself and what you want others to see. The icing on your Leadership Cake is what is on display. Your boss or potential boss, peers, and coworkers will make a quick judgment based on what they see and smell from you and your icing.

So when I refer to icing, I want you to think of yourself as the well-formed Cake that has been put together and baked with care and that your icing is what others can see. Let’s put it another way: What is it you stand for? What are the visible values and beliefs you display openly? What are you about? What does your icing actually say about your Leadership Cake?

The Aftertaste

When you’ve eaten cake, what’s left behind are the crumbs. What was it that made you enjoy it—how it made you feel maybe? Certainly how it tasted. Our taste buds are covered with between 2,000 and 8,000 tiny receptors that tell us if the taste was bitter, sweet, or sour. These receptors send information to the brain and decipher that information to provide us with an experience.

You create the same experience and effect when the people who follow you have tasted your Leadership Cake. If their experience was a sweet one, they may use that part of their brain to recall those emotions and feelings to remember your Cake and the taste it left behind. It may provide them with thoughts of comfort and indeed shape their own recipe for their Leadership Cake.

You create experiences also if the taste of your Cake was a bitter or a sour one; the same recall may happen, but this time the taste would have been somewhat different and thus their memory of that time is unlikely to be positive.
You are the master baker of your Leadership Cake.

Conclusion

You have now explored the four essential ingredients in *Leadership Cake*. You also understand that you need to attempt to balance your ingredients: a spoonful too much or too few of these and your *Cake* is not a *Leadership Cake*, even if it may look like one.

Getting this part of the baking process right simply means that you have a great chance of becoming a great leader, but there is still work to do. Getting your filling right is essential to attracting, developing, and retaining great staff too. Your *Cake* may thus be more appetizing than other leaders’; hence people are more likely to choose you to lead them.

The icing on your *Leadership Cake* reflects the ongoing perception of others. Be careful and selective about what that says about you. If there were another you, looking back at you, what would you see?

Careful planning of your *Cake* now will leave a lasting aftertaste forever. You are the master baker of your *Leadership Cake*. How well have you thought through your ingredients? Are you thinking about the present or your legacy?

Good luck in baking your *Leadership Cake*!

Leadership expert Steve Rush is the CEO of Improov Consulting and author of the book *Leadership Cake*. He is the pioneer of the new global leadership philosophy of Leadership Cake, which includes online leadership 360° assessments, coaching, and training programs. Steve had a successful executive leadership career with several global businesses where he was personally responsible for multimillion dollar revenue and billions of dollars of funds and assets. He now coaches, trains, and develops leaders of all levels including international CEOs of global organizations. *Leadership Cake* is available in paperback and eReader in most online bookstores. See www.leadershipcake.com and www.improovconsulting.com.