

How binge-watching Marvel Movies makes you a better leader

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What Marvel Movies can teach about Leadership



It's not about you

I just rewatched Doctor Strange for the hundredth time, and what the Ancient One says to him with her last interaction before she dies left a deep impression on me. Doctor Strange was a brilliant neurosurgeon at the top of his game, a Ph.D. and MD, taking on only the most difficult cases. Until he has a terrible car accident that ruins his hands. Out of desperation, he finds a mystical teacher (the Ancient One) who trains him to become a brilliant wizard, capable of spells few others can accomplish, and looks to be at the top of his game.

And yet in both cases, he isn't as successful as he can be. Cue the dramatic scene where Doctor Strange fails to save the Ancient One, and in the last interaction, leaves him with this nugget of truth.

"It's not about you."

Time and again, I see leaders who have all the potential, brains, drive and insight to be great only to fall flat on their faces because their ego matters more than the greater good. Leaders aren't great because they focus on their own greatness. They're great because they focus on the greatness of humanity.

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I used to chase the external images of success: titles, salaries, perks, recognition. And I had a good result for a while chasing those things. I always wanted to do my best, learn and improve, and help others. But my measures of success were external recognition. And it always felt empty. After the rush of a promotion, an unexpected bit of recognition or surprise bonus or raise, the feeling left really quickly and I started pushing for the next one. And then I started hitting walls, where I felt I was being treated "unfairly". I wasn't being recognized for things that I thought were significant. And it affected my happiness severely.

I recently read Mike Myers's tribute to Canada (called simply "Canada"). Besides being an amazing tribute to the funny and not-so-funny parts of what being Canadian is like, there was a great nugget of truth in a story he told about lessons from Lorne Michaels. One of the other actors (never said who) stole his material completely and he went to Lorne Michaels to tell him that it wasn't fair. Lorne said, "You're right that isn't fair. But why would you want life to be fair? If life was fair everyone would be equal and you wouldn't have all this amazing talent." It's a great lesson in focusing on gratitude for the things that are great in life, instead of what goes wrong.

Too often high achievers get caught up in their own success, and the images of it. Have you ever thought after you've achieved some milestone, promotion, or success, "that's good, what's next"? Or have you felt unfulfilled by your achievements, thinking they are no big deal?

This can be a sign that you have built an unrealistic expectation on yourself to be perfect, but it can also mean that what you are focusing on is collecting the trappings of success without choosing things that bring you meaning. Focus instead on being grateful for the truly amazing things you have.

Real meaning comes from doing things that aren't about you

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Meaning comes from helping others, not helping yourself. This is a hard lesson for many to learn, but as Managers, Leaders, it is the key to true success. Founders of unicorn companies often talk about finding a problem in society and setting out to solve it, not to bring themselves ridiculous wealth.

Let's face it, we are all a bit selfish. We are the stars in our own movies, we are present for everything

we witness. But when we focus on doing our best for the benefit of someone else, a colleague, a customer, a friend, a stranger, society, then it can bring true joy to your life.

When you experience that sensation of doing something for someone else's benefit, it will become addictive.

This is where creating a real mission statement for your company can help too. You could publish a mission like, "Let's double our revenue in 5 years". That's a mission that is self-centered and about getting the image of success.

A powerful alternative could be, "Simple and effective engineering solutions that are right the first time". Focusing on doing that great for your customers can bring you that 2x revenue in 5 years, but it makes your mission about how you serve your customers, not about what you get in return.

The same holds true for your personal mission. Are you in a job now where you wonder how you are helping others, and not coming up with anything? Maybe you're in the wrong job for yourself. Maybe you never thought about how your role helps others. But if you can, spend a few minutes thinking about how you can create a mission that's about helping your colleagues, customers, suppliers, or society. Focus on what resonates with you as meaningful. Then spend your energy on those things and see if you experience more joy and satisfaction in what you do. I'm betting that you will.

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Date Created

October 2021

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