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Leadership and the Way of the Pig: Lessons from Babe

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In case you did not know, pigs are very intelligent creatures—fourth in line on the intelligence scale after humans, primates, and dolphins. Capable of solving problems and thinking imaginatively, their long-term memories allow them to apply solutions from one situation to another. Perhaps this is why they have achieved such popularity. And the most popular of all pigs is the movie star simply known as Babe. Of course, we would not want to discount the importance of Miss Piggy in carving out a niche for pig success in Hollywood; but for our purposes here, Babe plays a more significant role in demonstrating leadership and the way of the pig.

If for some reason you've missed this critically acclaimed movie, we shall provide a brief summary. On one level, "Babe" is a relatively simple story of a pig who thinks he's a sheep dog. Babe's owner, Farmer Hoggett, witnesses firsthand the pig's special and unique talents, and decides to enter him in the annual sheep-herding competition. Of course, the competition is for dogs; but because the rules do not limit the competition to "dogs only," Babe is allowed to compete. He not only wins the competition, but also the hearts of all who observe his amazing ability to herd sheep. On a much deeper level, "Babe" is not just a story about a pig, but a symbolic representation of how an unlikely leader is able to motivate others to achieve a goal. This is where our story begins.

The Way Things Are

Lessons learned in life often come from unlikely places. Just when we think we understand all there is to know about being a leader and managing an organization, along comes a pig. Interestingly, Babe didn't start out thinking he was

going to be in charge of anything. In fact, like most pigs, he was focused on finding a place in the barnyard, surviving, and eating. Sure, he was curious about the other animals in the farm and often observed how each creature doggedly competed for the farmer's attention; however, he was intrigued most by rules and wanted to know more about the way things are. For instance, it didn't take Babe long to learn that only dogs and cats were allowed in the house. He quickly observed that Fly and Rex, the farmer's prized sheep dogs, were in charge of the other animals. Because of their long history with the farm, both of these dogs were able to maintain the status quo—to keep order and prevent chaos. What Babe didn't understand was why the sheep demonstrated an ineffable dislike for Rex and Fly and why they often echoed the admonition, "They will just as soon bite you as look at you." And so the sheep called them "wolves." Conversely, the dogs insisted that "sheep can't look after themselves without us." Babe was different; he liked the dogs and the sheep and didn't understand the animosity that existed between them.

Had Babe been a human instead of a pig and given a chance to attend a community college and study managerial theory, he would have known that sheep are symbolic for followers, and that in any organization, one would find a large group of employees who represent the support staff. These individuals fall low on the hierarchical chain of decision-making and often are disregarded by management. As a result, they sometimes develop distrust for leaders. On the contrary, supervisors or managers feel empowered because they view the support staff much like Rex and Fly viewed the sheep—as individuals who can't look after themselves. They create rules and regulations, and dictate desired behavior. Babe was unique in that he entered into this new environment without any preconceived notions about the inhabitants. He saw value in all the creatures and knew that might doesn't make right. Although Babe saw the fear in the eyes of the sheep when they spoke of the wolves, he trusted the farmer's dogs and knew that they would not hurt another creature intentionally.

Babe's natural ability to communicate honestly with others helped make him a successful leader. On the contrary, the duck in the barnyard was savvy, a nonconformist—content to play any role that would ensure

safe distance from the farmer's dinner table. Banking his longevity on an ability to imitate a rooster, the duck felt certain that his place would be secured by waking the household with a hearty *cock-a-doodle-doo* each morning at dawn. Eventually, however, the farmer's wife learned of the many benefits of an alarm clock, and the duck faced his greatest fears. In an effort to save himself, he partners with Babe in an attempt to confiscate the round, ringing, red object. Unfortunately, their efforts came in contact with the Farmer's cherished cat, leaving the interior of the house in disarray. Recognizing the duck as the instigator of this sad affair, the other animals forbid Babe from talking with his friend. The cow offers the following admonishment: "The only way to find happiness is to accept that the way things are is the way things are." Disenchanted, the duck leaves for "kinder and gentler lands." It is not difficult to associate the duck's plight with individuals in an organization who feel threatened and afraid—who simply do not fit in and in a desperate effort to save themselves, attempt to become something they are not.

Babe was different, and what we soon learn from him is that the way things *are* may not be the way things *should be*. The way of the pig teaches us that rules, regulations, and traditions are not absolutes—that it's okay to question the status quo. It teaches us that reality is a thing of perception and that what may seem reasonable to one person may not be to another. It also explains why Babe did not hesitate to befriend the duck—an independent and highly creative resident of the farm.

Babe's inquiries are not predicated on making changes to the farm. He simply wants to understand why things happen, and he is willing to break the rules if he feels something is wrong or if he senses there is danger beyond the safety of the farmer's gate.

His willingness to help others seems altruistic. Babe helps because he thinks it's the right thing to do, not because he expects something in return. Unlike the other animals on the farm, Babe vows that he never will think badly of any creature again—something different from the way things are or from the way things have been.

A Pig Who Thinks He's a Dog

Babe's initiation into sheep herding came about by luck. It was only by guessing Babe's weight at the county fair that Farmer Hoggett came to possess this pig. Because one farmer saw something beyond the pig's round pink body and his large pink ears, and because destiny is an unstoppable force, Babe began his new journey as a pig who thinks he's a dog.

There is a certain naiveté about Babe. Although he is a pig, he doesn't know much about being a pig or about what pigs do, in general. So it's only reasonable to expect that Babe would not be content just to sleep under the cart, roll around in the mud, and eat watered-down scraps of food thrown into a wooden trough. An insatiable curiosity is only

one of Babe's numerous and emerging leadership characteristics. He was curious about what it was that the dogs on the farm did all day in the field and why it was that the sheep seemed so afraid of them and called them wolves. Babe's curiosity led him to explore and to experiment. It was on one particularly sunny morning that Farmer Hoggett slowly raised one eyebrow in observation of Babe's success at separating the brown chickens from the white ones. Was this only a coincidence, or did it portend a new future for the pig?

Perhaps when a pig thinks he's a dog, something extraordinary happens—others begin to think of him as a dog, as well. Is it possible that there are individuals in organizations who become leaders, not because they intend to do so, but because their actions and attitudes are indicative of what is expected of a leader?

It's easy to identify some of the early leadership traits that Babe began to demonstrate on the farm. It's also easy to point out some of his missteps in trying to emulate the leadership of others. Babe had great empathy for all creatures and no preconceived notions about the other animals. His curiosity for learning expanded his possibilities beyond the world of a pig. Babe was fascinated by the work of the sheep dogs. He was amazed by their ability to round up the sheep and herd them into a pen. When Farmer Hoggett gave him a chance to corral the flock, Babe imitated the way of the dogs, at first. He acted like the dog he was trying to be, rather than risking being himself.

He tries to bark and bite the sheep in an attempt to get them to follow his orders. After all, he learned from the dogs that you couldn't treat sheep as equals. You must let them know who's the boss. There were several minor problems with Babe's first leadership attempt. Pigs do not have sharp teeth, and so his bite did little to intimidate the sheep. And, because the sheep did not talk to the dogs, the dogs believed that sheep were incapable of communicating. Babe knew that the sheep could speak, and he was surprised by the advice he received from Ma, one of the senior sheep. She suggested that there was no need for all this "wolf nonsense" and that all a nice pig like Babe needed to do was "to ask."

Babe gave up trying to be something he was not. It took him little time to realize that thinking one can do the work of a dog and acting like a dog are two different things. Many individuals stumble and trip along the path to leadership. And sometimes the barriers along the way are not created by external challenges. These bumps and wrong turns often are created internally, by attempting to reach a destination rather than accepting that the way to leadership is in the journey. When Babe gave up trying to be like the dogs and forcing the sheep to follow, he learned that he already possessed the skills needed to be a successful leader. He only needed to be himself.

Babe also knew the importance of communicating.

Support staff in an organization will not talk to the senior leaders if they feel these leaders do not listen or do not recognize or identify the needs of the employees. We are all familiar with a body of management theory which suggests that fear and intimidation are keys to winning other's respect. In particular, Machiavelli's infamous observation: "In a newly conquered territory, the leader should implement his harshest acts all at once, but stream out benefits and mercies, so that the people might come to appreciate him over time." The sheepdogs experienced years of successfully herding sheep by letting them know who was in charge—by demonstrating an attitude of superiority and conquering their territory.

Babe's way of leading is more like the transformational leader—one whose actions represent a shift from the traditional ways of thinking about leadership in that they implement a more holistic approach. Equally important to possessing knowledge and skills, a leader must possess a certain character—a promise of integrity, not only to lead an organization, but to lead without sacrificing authenticity. Neither individuals nor organizations can realize success if they work with old assumptions. Results are achieved most often by groups of individuals, are not dependent solely on the leader, but on a leader's ability to understand the people with whom he or she works—recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the leader should take responsibility for communication—should determine what needs to be shared and how information should be disseminated, matching the worker's ability to receive and understand the message.

Babe demonstrates great success at being a transformational leader. What we learn is that the pig is more concerned about the well-being of others than about his own. He has no agenda about being a leader. His intentions are genuine, and his desire is to communicate honestly, to value and respect the other creatures on the farm, and, of course, to please the farmer.

Pig of Destiny

Babe proves to be an exceptional pig, and Farmer Hoggett has great faith in him. However, even with his success, Babe continues to learn lessons from the other animals on the farm. Perhaps the most disturbing message comes from one of the farmer's most privileged pets, the cat. Throughout this story it is clear that very few of the other animals respected or got along with the cat. A temperamental loner, she stops at nothing to seek the harshest revenge if another animal tries to usurp her envied place inside the farmhouse. Unfortunately, the farmer's growing affection for Babe is too much for the cat to stomach, leaving her with no other choice but to tell the pig the truth—that pigs don't have a purpose other than to be eaten by humans.

Although the other animals on the farm confirm the

news communicated by the cat, they reassure Babe that he was special—that his extraordinary abilities were genuine. And when Farmer Hoggett nurses the pig back to health in an unlikely bonding of two unlikely friends, Babe realizes that he has a purpose other than being eaten. Unfortunately, there are some individuals in most any organization waiting for the opportunity to discredit the leaders—probably long-term employees who have tenure who have seen leaders come and go. They can be brutally honest, and their actions can be motivated by personal agendas. A leader such as Babe understands that change is slow and that to earn respect, one must be willing to listen, empathize, value the worth of every employee, and build relationships based on trust and honesty. One of the most significant leadership characteristics Babe demonstrates is the ability to form lasting and meaningful relationships. Relationships formed in the past allow him to be successful in future, new situations.

Babe's most significant challenge as a leader was encountering a new flock of sheep at the annual sheep dog competition. Successful at herding sheep back at the farm, he had taken the time to get to know each of the animals and build a trusting relationship. But the animals at the competition were unimpressed by his pig ways and seemed disinterested in building any kind of relationship. Perhaps they did not know how to communicate. Babe faced his greatest dilemma. Was he a leader or just a pig? Babe had made it a priority to befriend each animal on the farm; and because he relied on the good will of others, it was no surprise that the farmer's prized sheep dog, Rex, his former adversary, came to Babe's aid and delivered the secret password that would ensure cooperation from the sheep. This is another lesson to be learned: It is wise not to discount the importance of your enemies. They may turn out to be great friends.

"Baa-ram-ewe," the secret password that Rex whispered to Babe was more than just a code for appropriate behavior. It was an affirmation that created an immediate understanding between the pig and the sheep, and it allowed Babe to demonstrate that he was not just another farm animal—that he wasn't going to bite, growl, and assert his way. It suggested that Babe was an important pig and that the sheep could turn their woolly coats in his direction and listen to his proposal. And they did.

Babe was wise to consider how necessary it is to depend on others to get the job done. The farmer's sheep dog, Rex, helped persuade the sheep to relinquish the secret code; and the flock of sheep at the competition agreed to follow Babe's commands so that he could win the competition. Examples such as these confirm what we already know—that leadership is not a solitary activity performed in an insular environment. Babe knows the value of unconditional friendship and learns quickly the important lesson that leaders can't do it alone.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

There are many lessons to be learned from Babe's story. Babe teaches us that the genius in leadership is in its execution and that it is not necessary for a leader to assert power and control to get things done. It's all about understanding yourself, understanding others, and building successful relationships. These key strategies will help any leader embrace the way of the pig. Leaders . . .

1. Never underestimate others—Babe was the runt of the litter!
2. Know that the eyes can be the window to the soul—Farmer and Babe made contact and felt a faint whisper of destiny.
3. Have great empathy—Babe asks if he can call Fly “mom” when she is missing her pups.
4. Push the boundaries—A pig does the work of a dog . . . imagine!
5. Have their own authentic style—What works with your soul is the right approach.
6. Understand what lies beneath the surface of things—Rex's history results in current negative behavior.
7. Show true emotion when its needed—When Ma died, Babe grieved openly.
8. Treat all with kindness—Babe was kind to the old sheep, and the herd returned the favor.
9. Know that when one leads, others might be envious—Rex is jealous of Babe.
10. Persevere—When everyone was laughing as Babe began herding sheep, he stayed the course.

Within the dark, cool recesses of a movie theatre, the story of Babe unfolded like magic onto the screen. The audience experienced a fable acted out in movie format, about how one reticent farm animal was able to achieve his dream of becoming a sheep pig. And from Babe's dreams and subsequent success as a leader, we learn many valuable lessons. The destiny of this pig represented the destiny of any aspiring leader—believing in oneself, valuing others, and having your dreams come true.

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