Sometimes You Lead and Sometimes You Follow
An interview with Mike Wheeler, Senior Vice President Supply Chain and Chief Procurement Officer, Fluor Corporation

By Reshma (Ray) Yewle

What makes a great leader? Is there a formula to be one? Or do we begin with a laundry list of attributes that every leader must possess? Can everybody be a leader? Burning questions like these are on the minds of almost every university student. Leadership is often touted as the #1 skill recruiters look for in an individual today and garners tremendous attention when new styles crop up amongst twenty-something executives. Literature on leadership is plentiful and a simple internet search will inundate you with dos and don’ts of it. However, the fact still remains that for many of us, it still remains a rather opaque idea or even a source of anxiety. How can we then navigate this sea of information and misinformation, of confusing and overwhelming number of opportunities, to fire up our temporal lobes and grow into the natural leaders we were meant to be?

Let’s begin with a discourse. Let us converse not just about a person who led well or how successful they became or what snazzy product or service they provided to the world. Instead let’s dig deep into their human story. What choices did they make while pivoting at different points in their lives? Learning about their trials and tribulations, motivations and how they manage priorities is of great significance to any student who aspires to be leader. There is a wealth of knowledge in learning about missteps and course corrections undertaken by executives in their professional and personal lives. Furthermore, opening up such a discussion makes larger-than-life leaders more relatable and brings hope to students to sow the seeds for success much like them.

My search to start such a discourse led me to sit down with Mike Wheeler. A sportsman, a top executive, an entrepreneur, a daredevil; Mike steadily rose up the corporate ladder and also worked as an expat in one of the biggest conglomerates in India. He is a man of strong ethics and has a penchant for challenge and adventure.

Begin by looking inwards
“I realized very earlier on that I wanted to work on a project basis; have a compact target, achieve it and get results. Hence I went into consulting” Mike told me. This is great advice for most us who are soul searching out there. Knowing who you are and the challenges that a particular career path entails will help you narrow down your career choices. A career in consulting is lucrative but may not be for everyone. Mike took an inventory of his personality, interests, values and skills to launch into a successful career.

Lessons from childhood
Mike reminisces, “My most important role models growing up were my father and my basketball coach. My father’s philosophy was to work hard, do the right things and you'll be recognized and rewarded. Don’t advertise your good work, let it speak for itself. Don't be a self-promoter. I’ve always done that, although there were times in my career where others took credit for my work since I did not promote it
myself. It resulted in some steps backwards, but I always found a way to move forward by being true to my beliefs, which my father instilled in me.”

Mike adds, “From my coach, I learnt one of the most crucial lessons of life – *Sometimes, somebody else will have a better plan for you*” Mike wanted to play the small forward position and worked very hard to pile on twenty pounds in order to be strong enough to play on the inside vs the outside. But his coach had a different plan for him; he wanted Mike to be the shooting guard. Now twenty pounds heavier, Mike couldn’t keep up with the other shooting guards, thus making the coach unhappy. Therefore, we learn that sometimes your mentor is better able to connect the dots and see the entire picture which you may not be able to do. It’s good to listen. “Coach is always right” says Mike. Indeed, a lesson learnt the hard way.

Sports embedded essential leadership and life skills in Mike. He played team sports all his way through school and college, where an efficient outcome cannot be achieved without the united efforts of all the players. One of Mike’s favorite basketball players, Larry Bird famously said, “*Leadership is diving for a loose ball. It’s about being able to take it as well as dish it out. That’s the only way you’re going to get respect from other players*” Mike learnt that he had to be prepared, individually, so as to not let his team down and to work together while switching roles as a leader and team player.

**Management lessons**

EQ (Emotional Intelligence) is a concept that still constitutes as psycho-babble for many. It is however an important skill that transcends all areas of life, including your professional one. As a consultant, Mike has traveled around the world and dealt with a diverse set of people. As he recounts, “Working with people from different cultures has its own set of challenges. I remember that once I couldn’t reach an agreement with one such coworker. Instead of pushing for my point of view, I simply stated that *we must agree to disagree*. To him however, it was of primordial importance that we believe in the same thing. I set the boundaries and we were able to circle back to our goal” This is how we can learn to manage conflicts tactfully. It isn’t so important to be proven right than it is to reach a common goal through mutual understanding. Learning to detach oneself from one’s pride and ego to achieve social cohesion is a great skill for anybody to have.

**On working with Reliance Industries Limited (India)**

Mike embarked on a new opportunity, mid-career, to work as a project manager and head of procurement, Center of Excellence, for India’s largest energy and petrochemical company. He had to adapt to a very different culture and management style, while still upholding his own beliefs. When things got tough, he still held on for his team in order to do justice to their hard work. One can learn so much from just this snippet; adaptability, perseverance and sacrifice, each of which is intrinsic to becoming a great leader.

**Other important leadership attributes**

“Humility is the most important one. If your team does not think they can approach you freely, you have lost the opportunity to grow.” Mike opines. His humility is evidenced by his demeanor, the content of his stories and his success. He continues, “Strong ethics is another and the most non-negotiable attribute for me” Mike has a vast experience in a range of industries from information technology, aviation, semiconductors, energy as well as engineering, procurement and construction. Additionally, since he has worked as a consultant with a heterogeneous group of colleagues, one may think that his ethics would surely have been tested. “Whoever I worked for or worked with was cognizant about where I stood with regards to ethical boundaries. If asked to do otherwise, I’d say - *I’m not your guy!*” Mike asserts. Taking moral inventory of oneself and developing clarity of actions that arise out of it will help us discover ourselves and provide the courage to continue being our true selves. Living your values will ensure contentment not just in your professional lives but personal too.
A word of advice for the young generation of today
“Develop a specialty, a core competency that will set you apart from your peers. I also believe that young people today have a gargantuan task on their hands with regards to bridging the gap between the way the older workforce orients themselves versus the way young people do; for example, my father’s generation held one job for almost over two decades, my generation often held a job for less than one before moving on to the next and now that number is much smaller amongst the young folks. They will really have to balance the pressures of their generation with the ethics and work values of the older lot who will be their mentors.” Mike concludes succinctly.

As my interview with Mike comes to a close, I feel more enriched after listening to the ‘human story’ behind success and glory. This achievement via our disquisition is a far cry from reading any clichéd, humdrum material on the topic. There are several takeaways for me as I hope there are for you as a reader too. As I find my way back home, my mind echoes, “Know when to lead and when to follow!”