

THE MAKING OF THE ACHIEVER

How to Win Distinction
in Your Company


ALLAN COX

Author of THE COX REPORT
ON THE AMERICAN CORPORATION



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in Your Company



by

Allan Cox

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THE
MAKING OF
THE ACHIEVER

Also by Allan Cox

Confessions of a Corporate Headhunter

Work, Love and Friendship

The Cox Report on the American Corporation



*Learning is finding out what you already know.
Doing is demonstrating that you know it. Teaching
is reminding others that they know as well as
you.*

RICHARD BACH in *Illusions*

Leadership is a virtue rather more widely subscribed to than understood.

The legitimate occasions for leadership in corporations largely involve change. Only routine management, not leadership, is needed in stable and secure organizations. The leader then sets new goals and justifies them, sets performance standards, and encourages followers to new effort. He is an innovator, moralizer, demonstrator, teacher. And as such, he is a dangerous man.

Leadership of the type and quality that corporation executives sometimes like to attribute to themselves as “great leaders of men” is usually, and fortunately, the product of a mistaken ego. Real crisis situations may provide opportunities for truly individual leadership. If the crises are manufactured, the strategy is likely to wear thin. And in the ordinary course of events such individual qualities must be severely restrained for the sake of organized and orderly action.

WILBERT E. MOORE

The Conduct of the Corporation

What they (business executives) seem to forget is that strong leadership is anathema to a democracy. The whole idea is that our democratic system itself creates a strong, viable society, and that has been our history. We don't need strong leaders, and we have not attracted strong leaders except in times of crisis.

JOHN NAISBITT

Megatrends

Introduction: The Achiever's Profile

We have entered a particularly gratifying, spirited period in American business. I believe we have turned a corner. After taking our lumps in both the domestic and foreign press for poor products, rewarding the short view and neglecting the customer, American corporations and their executives have begun to come off the defensive and rightly feel good about themselves again.

I further believe that we deserved much of this criticism, and are beginning to feel better about ourselves because we realize we *weren't* paying attention to the proper matters and now want to set things right. Our priorities *were* out of whack, and while we told ourselves we were making the most of our capital investments, this harvesting attitude led us away from long-term commitments that served the best interests of our customers. Taking care of our customers takes care of our companies—over the long pull, and that's what counts. We had forgotten that, but again are beginning to remember.

The “back to basics” mentality that is prevalent today is a reflection that performance and substance take precedence over rhetoric and image. American business is indeed reasserting itself in response to aggressive foreign competition and the self-deception that had crept into its management practices and policies. This is overdue and welcome. Moreover, I have no doubt we are on the road back to commitment and mastery.

However, in the midst of this renewed flexing of American business muscle, we are likely to hear a growing chorus from corporations and the press about the need for more “leadership” and for more executives who are “true leaders”

and not “mere managers.” *Charisma* is likely to be dredged up again and put before us as a model. “Give us strong leaders,” we’ll say. “Show us a man or woman with charisma,” we’ll demand.

I would like to suggest that it is not “leadership” we need during this wonderful new start-up, but *achievement*. Leadership is a term that has become such a catchall that it is largely meaningless, or at best, has a definition known only to the speaker or writer who uses the word.

As an indication of this, it is instructive to note that the Random House College Dictionary offers twenty-nine definitions for the verb *lead*! By meaning so much, it ends up meaning little. Further, the primary definitions convey no overriding sense of distinction: (1) “to take or conduct on the way; go before or with to show the way”; (2) “to conduct by holding and guiding”; (3) “to influence or induce; cause”; (4) “to guide in direction, course, action, opinion, etc.”

Carrying this analysis a bit further, *leader* has ten definitions in all including: “a person or thing that leads”; “a guiding or directing head, as of an army, political group, etc.” *Leadership* itself is defined as: “the position or function of a leader”; “the ability to lead”; “an act or instance of leading”; “the leaders of a group.”

All of these definitions bring us to the point of realizing that in most usages “leader” refers to someone who holds a *position* or has attained a *title*, whether formal or informal in nature. We then are left with the necessity for an adjective to describe the *quality* of the leader. Consequently, we speak of progressive leaders, aggressive leaders, and those who are bright, articulate, balanced, energetic, perceptive, and so on. But there are also leaders to whom we apply such labels as petty, corrupt, slow, fearful, mediocre, short-sighted, self-serving, unimaginative, and so on. Clearly, there are extraordinary leaders, poor leaders, and average ones. To repeat, it is the modifier—not the noun—that gives us the picture.

What does it *mean* when a candidate for political office

claims to bring “new leadership” to the tasks at hand? Or when an organization boasts that it has shown “leadership?” Or when we say of our corporations or governments that we need “leadership?” Usually, “leadership” translates to whatever actions we prefer, such preference—like beauty—being in the eye of the beholder. In reality, for organizations or individuals to convince us they have shown leadership, *they have to be able to point to their achievements*. Then and only then do we begin to see something we can get a grip on.

Distinction intrudes our thought, however, when we consider the same dictionary’s definition of achievement: “something accomplished, as by superior ability, special effort, or great valor.” Often when we speak of *achievers*, we use modifiers, but they aren’t actually necessary. With apologies to Gertrude Stein, an achiever is an achiever is an achiever. We may say that a child is an underachiever, but what we mean by this term is that he or she *could be* an achiever, but *isn’t* one as yet. “Achiever,” unlike “leader,” is not a title. It is a category of accomplishment among persons.

To be sure, there are degrees of achievement. Some people are better at particular things than their associates are. For example, some members of a championship track team may be able to outperform other members in the same event, even though the minimum standards for making the team are exceptionally high to begin with. Moreover, we all know we may be achievers in some endeavors while not in others. So to reemphasize, it is our *performance* in an area—not our position or title—that determines whether or not we are achievers. Ironically, while a leader may turn out *not* to be an achiever, it is the achiever who *leads* and inspires with his or her accomplishments. He or she is someone to emulate!

Therefore, our present emphasis rightly should be on achievement because that is what squares with our renewed insistence on performance—in a hard, but good-sounding word: *commitment*.

The achiever, then, is a person who sets goals and meets

them. He or she is someone we can count on to get the right things done in a superior way and *keep* getting them done. In other words, the achiever never stops learning, growing, striving. Finally, today's achiever—working in a highly collaborative setting—is someone who gets things done through others.

By directing our attention to achievement rather than “leadership,” we eliminate a great deal of fuzzy-headed thinking and increase our personal accountability.

Concerning *charisma*, it is not my intention to denigrate it, but simply to point out that it is horribly overrated. My experience is that charismatic persons tend to be short-termers. Unless they are company founders, they often don't stay in one place for very long. Wanting to check out my impressions, I went back to the writings of Max Weber, the German sociologist who, in the early part of this century, gave us the concept of charismatic authority. Weber confirmed my thoughts with these words:

“The only basis of legitimacy for it (charismatic authority) is personal charisma, so long as it is proved; that is, as long as it receives recognition and is able to satisfy the followers or disciples. But this lasts only so long as the belief in its charismatic inspiration remains.”

We are notoriously fickle followers. What happens to our enterprises when we desert our charismatic leaders?

Rapid change and crisis are what call for extraordinary leadership and charisma. And in no way would I deny that these conditions are present in certain American corporations. But our current “back to basics” disposition is a reminder that for most of us, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Undeniably, what we have to cope with still is getting the job done in a caring, distinctive way. What we face is not a persistent call to Herculean tasks, but faithfully living up to our everyday commitments. That's where we are. As mundane as this may sound, this is achievement,

and it's what makes the world go round. Despite what you may read or hear from quick-fix snake oil salesmen about how to "make it" in the executive suite, it is this kind of steady competence that will bring you the highest psychic and monetary rewards in your work over time.

I would not want my vocabulary to be without the word "leader." Indeed, I use the word throughout this little volume. But what I mean by it is no more than someone who is "in charge" of some function or project, and who is called upon to exercise authority and influence upon others. My use of it is not meant to conjure up images the likes of Napoleon Bonaparte, Winston Churchill, or Franklin Roosevelt.

The Making of the Achiever is concerned with measuring, describing, and improving the performance of the actual hero who is needed now more than ever in the service of the American corporation. That hero is the *achiever*, and while he well may be charismatic, he more often is not; while she is undaunted, she does not necessarily call dramatic attention to herself. Rather, he or she gets the job done in a caring, distinctive way.

Being a consultant specializing in executive search and executive development for twenty years has put me in a unique position to observe executive achievement—or lack of it—across a total array of corporate functions, in a wide variety of industries, in companies that succeed, coast and fail at what they aim to accomplish. Not only has this work resulted in my interviewing and evaluating thousands of executives for specific high-level jobs, but it required that I spend hundreds of hours sitting across the desks from chief executives and other senior officers who shared with me their ideas about the management of their companies.

My hope is that these pages provide a fresh look at old truths. What few new trails I blaze have only to do with fashioning a scheme to understand the dynamics of executive achievement and providing the means for making them work for you. In short, my goal is simplicity, and to produce a

persuasive argument showing that executive achievers are marked by four main qualities. These achievers are: (I) other-centered, (II) courageous, (III) judicious, and (IV) resourceful.

Naturally, you might wonder how I chose these four qualities. True enough, I well might have chosen three, or six, or any number. However, from among all the qualities characteristic of achievers, these four, according to my lights, best sum up what these rare persons are all about. In other words, to my mind, *they constitute the profile of the achiever*.

The book is organized into four main sections and two appendixes. Each section examines one of these four broad qualities of the achiever. Appendix A (for those whose interests run in this direction) charts a slightly different course to deal with the impact of bureaucracy on the achiever, and how corporations can work to minimize its destructive elements on all their people. Appendix B contains answers to short quizzes that begin each chapter.

The four sections of *The Making of the Achiever* are further divided into five short chapters each, making twenty in all. Each chapter contains my observations on one critical thought-and-action pattern characteristic of the broad quality being examined in the section of which it is a part. Moreover, every chapter gets your attention right from the start by opening with a quiz that measures and rates your performance and adherence to that pattern. Your numerical score and rating are likewise determined for each of the four sections as a whole. Finally, a grand total score, arrived at by adding up those of the four sections, constitutes your *achiever index*.

An additional important feature of the book is that each chapter concludes with an exercise titled "Written Action Plan," designed by you, that shows you how to improve executive performance in specific ways and raise your achiever index.

As should begin to be clear, this book's aim is to put or keep you on the road to *hard mastery of essential soft subjects*. Accordingly, it deals solely with developing your competence

in critical areas that are intangible. For unless you attain such mastery, you cannot become an achiever. Therefore, you will find no pat formulas here. Distinctive, lasting success in the executive suite cannot be bought so cheaply. If you think it can, reading this book will waste your time. But if you agree that hard mastery of essential soft subjects is what buys the genuine article, *The Making of the Achiever* will reward you. Its quizzes, observations, and exercises will let you know *by score* exactly how far along you are in these subjects, and how you can assure yourself of improved performance, increased commitment, and continued progress in your career.

How to Use This Book

While every chapter is only one piece of the larger picture of which it is a part, it is meant to be a freestanding subject in itself. That is, if it were to be read alone, it should offer its own worthwhile lesson apart from any other. While my intention in writing this book is to provide you with a comprehensive and in-depth treatment of the requirements for achievement, I'm assuming that you, like I, are more accomplished in some areas than others. Consequently, it is likely some chapters in this book will be of more immediate interest and help to you than others.

Be that as it may, each chapter is structured in exactly the same way. Each has three parts. Each begins with a short quiz to force you quickly to take stock of yourself in its subject (for example, making judicious decisions) before I address that subject in an essay that follows. The purpose of the quiz is not to "outsmart" you or be tricky in any way. As you will see, it is easy to discern what the "right" answers are to the questions. However, since no one but you knows what your answers will be, you have every reason to be completely honest with yourself in your responses. You will tally your answers for each quiz and derive a score that will give you an indication of your level of competence in the subject under discussion in the chapter. For our purposes here, scores and ratings in the "fair" or "poor" categories constitute *non-achievement*.

The essay of each chapter comprises its second part and requires little comment. It is simply my observations on what it means to be competent in the subject under consideration.

The third and final part of each chapter is the written

action plan. This demands the most effort on your part. After you have taken the quiz and computed your score, and then read the essay, you are called on in the third part to complete three exercises which make up *your* written action plan. These exercises require rigorous thought and immediate commitment from you. They constitute the “how to” part of this book to ensure that it is more than a mere intellectual experience. It is the part that aims at changing *your* thought-and-action patterns to improve your performance and raise your *achiever index*.

Let me caution you on the exercises, however, and follow up on a hint I dropped earlier. I believe it would be a mistake for you to approach the exercises of every chapter with equal fervor. I say this because, as will be made clear, they ask a great deal of you. If you were to try to do all of them in short order, unless you are a certified genius, and a triple-A time manager, you wouldn’t have any time left for your job itself!

By all means, take every quiz, read each essay, and peruse all the exercises to learn which ones may have something special to offer you. On the other hand, on those quizzes where your scores indicate you need to grow in an area, embark on the exercises of *that* chapter energetically. Another alternative would be to take all quizzes and read all essays before doing any exercises. In short, do whatever suits you best, but be sure to save all your written action plans so you can refer to them in the future. There will be value in that, and you will be able to note your progress. What is important to remember about the exercises, no matter how you elect to do them, is that while demanding, they also are *enjoyable* and *revealing* of self and others. Moreover, they are *rewarding*. Doing them will put you into firm contact with many of your neglected inner resources.

I believe this is a book for now and a book for later. To repeat, some of its subjects will be of more use to you now;

others of more use to you at another time. Keep it around. It can become a long-time (if threadbare) companion. Let some time go by, reread a particular essay, then retake a quiz or two. If you have put the exercises into practice, I'm confident that you'll be pleased with your growth in the interim.