



Interview with Wally Bock

Chuck: Hello everyone, this is Chuck Frey, author of *Up Your Impact - 52 Innovative Strategies To Add Value To Your Work*. Joining me today on this podcast is Wally Bock, the founder of Three Star Leadership Enterprises and a noted leadership expert and author. It seems like a lot of leadership books and blogs today are focused on leadership theory. What really sets Wally's Three Star Leadership blog apart is that it takes a much more practical direction. It's very hands-on, real world advice that's focused on the issues and challenges that leaders face today. He also writes extensively about how to cultivate your leadership skills because he believes leadership is very much an apprentice trade. In other words, you can learn something about it from books and in the classroom but you learn about it mostly from other people. It's great to have you on the podcast today, Wally. Welcome to you.



Wally: Thank you. I appreciate the introduction too. I'm ready to go.

Chuck: So, what, in your mind, are some of the biggest challenges that leaders face today?

Wally: Actually, I don't think in some ways they are much different than they have ever been. I think the biggest challenge is the twin goals of accomplishing the mission and caring for the people and that's been true since Caesar was riding around Gaul. But we are in an in between kind of time. We are in a time when the nature of work is changing, when more and more people are doing knowledge work and are seeking more autonomy and when the world is getting more

global. So, we have got more cross-cultural and cross-border stuff. And I think are the ongoing challenges and there's the challenge of living in this particularly challenging time.

Chuck: Are there some ways in which this prolonged economic downturn that we are in the middle of has made the challenges of leadership more difficult?

Wally: I think it makes everything more difficult. I think of it as walking up a hill, you know? In normal times it's a very gentle grade but when you get into a tough economic time, it's like walking up a much steeper hill and that's harder. And then, because this has been the kind of downturn it has been, there are people who have left the team but somebody still has to carry their stuff. So not only is the grade steeper but people are carrying bigger loads than they are used to and that just makes it harder on everybody.

Chuck: In this day and age, is it possible for anyone to become a leader or to exhibit leadership characteristics and if so, what are some of those characteristics that people should look at cultivating?

Wally: I have to jump in because I hate the term "leadership characteristics" and the reason that I do is that it takes us away from something that's learnable and doable and you talked about that emphasis of mine earlier. All of my research has essentially been based on the idea that great leaders do things that other leaders and non-leaders don't do. But because they are behaviors, if you learn to do them, you can get the same kind of results. So, if I can answer your question, in terms of behaviors, if you learn the stuff, you can do the stuff. And that's true regardless of the age. I mean you still have got role models, you still have got places you can get ideas, you can still get feedback. So, in that sense, it's no harder than it has ever been.

Chuck: What are some of the advantages that our listeners can take by increasing their level of leadership or looking at these behaviors or looking for things that they can adopt as their own?

Wally: I think we have got to be clear that there are really two kinds of leadership. And a lot of the discussions mix them up. If you are talking about influencing a group so that the group moves in the same, good direction, you can do that regardless of what kind of position you have whether you are an engineer or an engineering supervisor you can still do that. There's some people and I call them bosses in my blogs and in my writing for whom leadership is part of the job description. And the big difference between those two is that if it's in your job description you are accountable and you can't walk away from it.

Now, I like the idea that people can learn leadership behavior from anywhere. But I would also say if you want to get into the boss chain, if you want to see that as a promotion and so forth, that you really enhance your possibilities if you are exhibiting leadership characteristics and leadership behavior early – so that people can see you are a leader before they have to take a chance on you.

Chuck: And do you feel that's becoming more important today to exhibit those characteristics or behaviors so that you are noticed?

Wally: I'm not so sure it's the economic times but what I think is happening is one of our big changes is we are looking at other ways to select leaders. There are an awful lot of writers out there who think that the people who should select the leaders are the people who are going to be led. When that becomes more common, then you are not going to have much of an opportunity to lead if you haven't demonstrated some leadership behavior already.

Chuck: So, take us back a half a step here. How have leaders typically been selected in the past and how are you suggesting they will be selected more often in the future?

Wally: In business, historically, leaders are selected by people above them, their bosses or some process like that or a board of directors, depending where you are in the organization. But the selection is made by the people above you. There are some places where that is not true, even today. At CEMCO in Brazil and W.L. Gore in the United States, the way you become a leader is that people follow you. And that, I think, is going to become more common. It seems to be a better way for people who are knowledge workers to do it. I think followers are wise about those who not only will make a good boss but who want to be a good boss. I'm not so sure that the people above are as knowledgeable or can make as good a prediction.

Chuck: So, it sounds like if someone has the support of more people they are more likely to be successful in that role? Is that a fair assumption?

Wally: I think that's always a fair assumption. What I'm saying, though, is that if you show the things that we look for in a good leader; if you can make decisions and you are willing to talk to other people about behavior and performance, and you enjoy helping other people succeed, the people most likely to see that and value it are the people who are looking for someone to lead them rather than somebody who is looking at paper or HR files or trying to do some kind of interview process.

Chuck: In my new book I talk about how important it is for the average worker or manager or leader to add more value to their work. In your mind, how important is that now and in the years ahead?

Wally: I think it has always been important. I mean, I don't think it's anything new. I think you hit on the one thing: If you want to make a successful career and a rich life, putting more into your job and anything else you do so that you produce better quality work, so that you learn more, so that you develop, so that you help others – all of those things go to making things good. What I really liked about the stuff you sent me about your book is that I think that's exactly what you zeroed in on. You are basically saying to people, if I understand it right, you will tell me in a minute I'm sure, become more valuable and you are more likely to do well.

Chuck: In a sense there's nothing totally new there. It's more of a reminder that these are some of the strategies that are proven, that people have used for years. The principles of success haven't really haven't changed very much even though the technology all around us has changed rapidly. You are still dealing with people and behavior.

Wally: Human nature hasn't changed since we crawled of caves.

Chuck: Exactly.

Wally: I think your book hits that really well.

Chuck: You talk in some of the articles you have written about developing your skills and your relationships at every opportunity. How can that strategy pay off today?

Wally: I think that's all you have to develop. You develop your knowledge and you develop your skills. You look for opportunities to do that and as you progress through life and through a career, what you have learned and the relationships you have, give you both support and opportunity. It's as you just said a second ago, it's not anything new, that's pretty much the way it has always been, but it's still important. It's not a magic trick. It's bringing that emphasis and that attitude to work every day and then really digging in and doing it.

Chuck: Is there a set of qualities that leaders are looking for in their direct reports today if they had an ideal picture of a great worker?

Wally: Well, I think, again, it's something that hasn't changed much, but I think it's true and it's worth contemplating. If I'm a boss, here's what I want from you: I want you to show up and pitch in to do good work. I want you to be the kind of worker that I don't have to pay a lot of attention

to. I want you to help other people to succeed as well as help your team members and that sort of thing. I want you to be somebody who is interested in growth opportunities. Because that's the one thing that I can give you that's almost invaluable.

Chuck: To what extent do you think leaders are able to find those kinds of people or do you think there's still a lot of shell-shocked folks out there that are terribly overworked due to downsizings?

Wally: I read all of the stuff about how hard it is to find talented people and I'm just going to say I don't think that's true for great bosses or great companies. I don't care how deep the downturn has been. I don't think Google or Amazon has had any trouble finding quality people to hire. And I have been in organizations where people gave up positions that might be more comfortable or might give them a better work environment for great bosses. Great bosses, great companies, great teams and divisions within companies, don't have a problem finding talent.

Chuck: They seem to naturally attract them I guess.

Wally: I mean, where would you want to work? If I walked up to you today and I said here's two places you can work: You can work at this bank where everybody hates their job and you can look at a glass door or a vault and see all of these negative comments or you could work at Google. Which would you pick? It's the law of nature. Good people attract good people.

Chuck: What's happening in terms of how companies are leading these days? Do you think that the whole traditional idea of companies viewing their people as interchangeable cogs in a machine. Is that overstated or are there a lot of companies that still kind of follow that command and control model that people are interchangeable?

Wally: You know, I don't know how many there are but the answer to that is there are too many. And you know people are an amazing resource. Any other resource that you get, the instant that you acquire it, it starts to depreciate. It wears out. People are different. You put people into your organization and unless you stop them, they will grow, they will develop, they will learn, they will develop knowledge, they will develop relationships – and they will be more valuable a year from now than they are today.

Chuck: That's a great way to look at it.

Wally: Especially if you are one of those people. Another thing about adding value if you are one of those people who shows up and does that stuff you are more valuable a year from now,

in two years, then five, and ten years. And I'm old enough to have watched enough careers that I'm really sure of that.

Chuck: You make the point in some of your writings, Wally, that companies can't succeed if only a few people at the top are doing all the thinking. Why is this a problem and what do you think is a more effective approach going forward?

Wally: It's a problem because we are not smart enough to do it. I don't care how big your brain is – you can't make all the decisions for all of the people in the company. You can't anticipate every situation. And even if you could, you wouldn't be able to process all of the inputs and outputs fast enough to make it work. I mean why you need every brain in the game, to quote Jack Welch. The brains are what make it go. And people bring things that you never knew they had when they are committed to the work.

Chuck: Very good. Do you have any other suggestions for our listeners as we draw to the close of this podcast on how to add value to their life's work?

Wally: You will do better if you concentrate on contribution instead of on activity or instead of on yourself. Everything meaningful that will affect your career happens outside of you. It happens in the contributions you make to your team; it happens in the contribution you make to relationships; it happens in the contribution you make to your friends, to your coworkers, and to the work itself. And if you keep looking at that and looking at what you can do to help people, that's the key to a great career and a rich life.

Chuck: Excellent advice. So, in closing, where can our listeners find you online and are there any current or recent projects you'd like to mention before we close this podcast?

Wally: Well, my projects are pretty much ongoing. You can find me at the Three Star Leadership blog which is at blog.threestarleadership.com. I have also got a new blog about the writing that boosts careers and businesses and that's my zero draft blog which is at www.writingabookwithwally.com.

Chuck: So, what prompted you to start that blog?

Wally: A large part of what I have been doing for the last ten years has been what's normally called ghostwriting- helping people write great business books. It's an outgrowth of that and it's a current major emphasis for me.

Chuck: You are talking about writing that boosts careers. Do you think excellent communication skills are more important today than they have ever been or has it been pretty much a constant like many of the other things we have talked about?

Wally: I think it's constant in the sense that it's always among the most critical but I think a lot of what we do today requires skills. You've got social media, you've got email, you've got text messages, you've got telephone, you've got audio and video conferencing, all in addition to what you do in person. So, you've got more tools to master, but it's as important as ever.

Chuck: Like knowing which tools to use when is pretty important.

Wally: I think that's part of it too. When I'm training bosses, one of the things I say is one of your major tools is conversation. If you have regular conversations with the people on your team you won't have to worry about knowing them and they won't have to worry about knowing you. It's not a trick, but it works.

Chuck: Right. Thank you for your time today, Wally. It's been very instructive. I look forward to seeing more of your great work online.

Wally: Thank you very much for having me and really good luck with the book. It looks like a good one.

Chuck: Thanks.

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