

Susan J. Bethanis, Ed.D., is the founder/president of Mariposa Leadership, Inc., a 10-person San Francisco-based leadership coaching and consulting firm. Mariposa's clients are executives and managers in the high-tech, biotech, and financial services sectors. Sue earned her Master's and Doctorate degrees at Stanford University and University of San Francisco, respectively. Her book, Leadership Chronicles of a Corporate Sage — a dialogue between her and a semi-fictional Silicon Valley executive — is due out from Dearborn Trade Publishing in September 2004.

LISA MARSHALL: What is your definition of leadership?

SUE BETHANIS: There are five key roles to becoming a leader: learner, relationship-builder, visionary, coach and globalist. These form the basis of our Corporate Sage leadership framework. They're in that order because each is more difficult than the one that precedes it. Ultimately, leaders are wise. Being a leader is finding the wisdom within you. Everyone can be a leader. The most effective leaders are ones who listen authentically. They have a way to still their minds while still going fast and performing well. Leaders are learners. There are basic meta skills that are critical to leadership; being open to feedback, centering oneself, understanding yourself and understanding your impact on others.

LM: What have been your most transformational experiences as a leader?

SB: One of the most transformational moments for me – that I can remember vividly – came from one of my Buddhist teachers. There was a moment in the room at a retreat when she was giving a dharma talk, sharing her meditation process and what she does when she gets distracted. She just says to herself “hmm, interesting,” sets it out there and goes back to being in “unthought.” It seems so simple. What I learned is that curiosity can overcome distraction and judgment. I learned to focus on my breath and not judge. This has been such a simple lesson as a leader and as a coach.

LM: What do you understand about leadership now that you didn't five or ten years ago?

SB: It has taken me a while to figure out those five key roles of a leader. When I did, it gave me a way to make leadership both familiar and give room for new possibilities for people. I really like the progression to coach as an ultimate leader, someone who is wise and self-reflective, as well as self-observant. And the globalist role takes leaders for the depths of self-observation to expanding perspectives.

Personally, what I know now that I didn't ten years ago is the importance of inquiry and dialogue. I had done it instinctively, but I didn't have the language, the container for it. I went through a phase of intellectually understanding and applying it, probably unconsciously compensating for the strength of my leadership. I was trying to have a tool where I wouldn't always dominate. I'm still a “girl” and want deep connections with people, even though I'm highly achievement-oriented and a driver. Doing dialogue work also taught me to listen, helped me realize I was going too fast.

In the last five years, I've learned to quiet my mind. Now I am being that person — that slower-listening person — who I have known intellectually I needed to be. I've learned to adjust speed, now I can go from 60 to zero in a second. So my quickness in going fast I can now use to go slow. It allows me to see more. That's what helps someone be wise. And I know that five years from now I'll be better at it — probably there will be less things that trigger me in five years than there are now.

My path to maturity as a leader is the same as my path as a good partner, a good boss, etc. The triggers of someone not doing what they'd said, not keeping up, not pacing me, not understanding me, betraying me; those things still anger me, will always anger me. I am just much more aware of it now. When my anger is triggered, it results in me going faster and louder, which doesn't work for most people. So that will always be my path, my struggle. Even as I'm getting less judgmental, in general, I still get frustrated by how un-evolved some people seem to be (like some of our political leaders). It actually saddens me now more than angers me.

I love coaching because I when I coach I don't have to be judgmental (the negative kind). And I know the challenge of being non-judgmental will always be there for me. I will always judge and there will always be room to not judge. That's my work; as a partner, as a leader, whatever. There will always be more to scrutinize. I'm hard on myself; I'm judgmental there too. I see what I could do more or better and I see what I do well. I don't think I'm as smart as I am.

LM: What else should we have talked about?

SB: The power of acknowledgement. It's the biggest aspect of coaching and leading for me. I acknowledge good work, and I ask for the changes that need to be made. Every day I try to say thank you to the people I work with.