

Pearls of Wisdom: Sourdough For Leadership

Welcome to my backyard and Pearls of Leadership Wisdom for 2021.

One of the questions that many of us have been bandying about in the last few weeks has been “what new thing did you take on last year that you will continue going into 2021 (which will hopefully be a better year) and that applies to your leadership?” And since hindsight is 2020, I got to thinking about this question and realized that one of the things I took on has a lot to do with leadership. I began making sourdough starter and sourdough bread. Now initially this is not going to sound like leadership, but it is tied to leading in times of change and tied to developing culture. So what is sourdough starter? Well for those of you who are not bakers, I’ll give you just a brief explanation.

First of all, sourdough starter is simply flour and water combined. You mix it together and let it sit on your counter for 7 to 10 days and during that time it begins to bubble and ferment because the natural action of the wheat as it dissolves into the water is to begin a fermentation process. That starter becomes the core of all of your sourdough bread even for years! It’s its own little ecosystem of microbes, bacteria, and microorganisms.

One of the things I learned really early on about making sourdough starter, and I was surprised by this, you have to feed it every day! Yes, every single day you have to feed it. That means you take out a portion of the starter, you discard it, and you mix in new flour and water and again let it sit and repeat and do it again the next day and again the next day. That starter becomes its own ecosystem and supposedly will last for years. In fact, even the pioneers who came west to San Francisco brought their own sourdough starter. All right, enough about the specifics of sourdough starter. How does this apply to leadership?

Well, suppose you are at the beginning of a change initiative. That change initiative needs your care and attention just like my starter did. It needs to be fed, every day. It needs your constant attention for it to have a chance to flourish and live and survive long term.

Or maybe you are in the midst of a change initiative. And another lesson from the starter is that you need to figure out what will you keep, what will you discard, and what will you add. What a great thing to have to think about in the midst of any change initiative. It does matter what you keep, what you discard, and how you choose to bring new and fresh ideas into the mix.

What about you as a leader of culture? It is interesting to me how many leaders right now whom I have conversations with are wrestling with how to expand, flourish, and nurture their own cultures. Use the lessons of the sourdough starter when you think about leading your own culture. Who or what needs your attention? What is the right timing for bringing in something new that adds new life to the culture? What is it that you want to keep and what is it that you want to discard? All of these relate to you as a leader of culture.



So think about the change you are leading, the change you are making in yourself, or the culture that you want to have. What are you doing to feed that culture? What are you doing to keep what is important? What are you doing to add new ideas into the mix?

As one scientist said about sourdough starter—it needs good time management, and yes, it needs affection! So here's to you and your leadership and cultural change starters in 2021!