

Foundational Qualities of Effective Leaders: A Different Perspective

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This paper will present another perspective on leadership—one that looks from the “bottom up.” It identifies a common thread in the fabric of effective leadership: attributes or traits that are critical to accomplishing the organizational mission, be it in the public or private sector. An effective leader is first an effective follower. By exhibiting the quality of dynamic subordinacy, the great leaders are better prepared for the servant-leader role. Here, one takes a deep, personal interest in the needs and welfare of others, and “rolls up the sleeves” with those he leads. With this foundation, the best leaders are principle-centered. Their reference point for decision making and mission accomplishment revolves around an “inside-out approach” to personal development and interpersonal relationships. Finally, great leaders are visionary. They set the pace for the organization by fostering an environment of teamwork and cooperation. The visionary leader provides solid direction and purpose—helping everyone find his or her unique roles and ultimate contribution to the mission.

Leadership. Just the mention of that term conjures up the image of leather-bound volumes of books, articles, and treatises written by people from all walks of life. World leaders, military leaders, distinguished college professors, and chief executive officers of major (and sometimes minor) corporations have all put pen to paper on this popular and somewhat elusive topic.

So why should I even attempt to present my thoughts on leadership? After all, I’m not a well-known political leader or military expert. But that being the case, perhaps I nevertheless can share my perspective from personal observations of the leadership styles and behaviors of my past commanders and supervisors. I’ve experienced both effective and ineffective leadership, and this discussion outlines my views of what I consider to be the readily identifiable and foundational qualities of effective leaders.

If we accept the basic premise that leadership is the art of influencing and directing people to accomplish the given mission, then I would not be misfocused to say that there is more to leadership than merely barking out orders from a personal power base, or smiling while quoting leadership theory and practice.

Although I do accept the limited importance of the personality approach (intelligence, competence, or special talents) to effective leadership, it nonetheless should play a

minor role compared to one’s character. And it is upon the basis of character that we examine the leader as follower, as servant, as principle-centered, and as visionary. After all, in the midst of difficult decisions, I hope leaders would be able to bring more to the decision table than good looks and good talk. I hope you will agree.

Discussion

In my opinion, the foundational quality of effective leadership is a thorough grasp of *followership*. After all, we are all accountable to someone else. In our lifetimes, we will spend more time taking orders than actually giving orders. Tragically, only a small fraction of the literature of leadership touches on effective followership. But what I have read is good and appears to squarely hit the target.

In centuries past, a Roman consul so eloquently stated,

Commanders should be counseled, chiefly, by persons of known talents, by those who have made an art of war their particular study, and whose knowledge is derived from experience; from those who are present at the scene of action, who see the country, who see the enemy, who see the advantages that occasions offer, and who, like people embarked in the same ship, are sharers of the dangers.¹

This speaks loud and clear of the impact subordinates can and should have in dealing with those in command. It speaks of a reciprocal agreement between leaders and those they lead. It speaks of listening and learning. Wise leaders do both.

This prepares us for perhaps the most distinct definition of effective followership. Followers “have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to either, and, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater purpose.”²

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This definition takes the best of followership out of the realm of merely displaying sheep-like qualities of passive, dependent, uncritical thinking, or actively carrying out orders uncritically. It also discredits those ineffective followers who merely survive with a “don’t make waves” attitude, or those who seek to undermine the very goals, policies, and procedures of the organization, including their contribution. Then they wrap this with adaptability and versatility within a dynamic, changing environment.³

One of the key principles of Scripture, so masterfully exemplified in the lives of many biblical characters, is that whosoever aspires to be the greatest among men must first be the least. This point leads me to the second attribute of great leaders—*servant-like attitude*. This attitude aligns beautifully with what we already discussed about followership.

The servant-leader gains the respect and admiration of his people by treating them with compassion and understanding; by active listening without judgment; by fostering an environment of trust where he is first found trustworthy; by recognizing and rewarding great performance without flattery; and by setting the example of selflessness instead of selfishness. A servant-leader can be found in the “trenches”—developing and nurturing those interpersonal skills with the men and women who carry the load. Then he leads the charge into battle, forging the path to victory ahead of those same people.

Consider the example of Gen Henry Viccellio Jr., commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC). He wanted to clearly understand the challenges his people faced, and the best opportunity was found “in his backyard”—at the training grounds for all Air Force enlisted personnel. Disguising himself as a new recruit, he captured a glimpse of basic training from the barracks. He wanted to see what they see; to feel what they feel; and, yes, to even clean latrines. When the full story emerged, one airman was overwhelmed by this senior leader’s concern for his troops. He said he would never forget this lesson in servant-leadership.⁴

When a leader takes a deep, personal interest in the lives of his people, on and off the job, morale is high and people are motivated to do their best. But, when a leader doesn’t care to meet the personal needs of the followers, morale plummets, motivation nose-dives, and the mission suffers. Only a fool would believe a mission can be accomplished without the support and allegiance of the people he or she serves. I have experienced organizations, firsthand, where those in charge would sacrifice their people, not for the mission (as they wanted others to believe), but for a vainglorious power surge. Nobody wanted to be in their command.

However, I have been in others where the commander cared about, listened to, and worked alongside—not over—the followers. He set the pace. We followed willingly; not because we necessarily had to, but because we wanted to. We recognized the leadership commitment and responded in kind. Perhaps our response to this quality of leadership mirrors that of the sailors who served in the command of the immortal British admiral, Lord Horatio Nelson. He had won

the admiration and respect of his followers to an unusual degree because he honored and respected them as individuals. In one memorable instance, just after the admiral had improved the living conditions on ship, an anonymous note from the crew appeared on the quarterdeck: “Success attend Admiral Nelson. God bless Captain Miller. We thank them for the officers they have placed over us. We are happy and comfortable, and *will shed every drop of blood in our veins to support them.*” (Emphasis added)⁵

Maj Gen Aubrey “Red” Newman, USA, retired, masterfully captured the essence of the servant-leader attitude. Listen to his comments about the “human touch” to leadership.

Most of us are concerned about the turning points in our own lives. But every good soldier in authority should be just as concerned with his responsibility to help those under him make the right turns. . . . It is easy to decide “in the best interest of the service” where money and materials are involved. When men are concerned, however, commanders must be perceptive and alert to see the turning points for individuals. It’s like finding four-leaf clovers; they’re always there, but you must look for them. Otherwise you may crush them underfoot unaware.⁶

In my view, the most effective leaders reach and maintain the delicate balance between the mission and the most important resource to its accomplishment—people. Call it a quest. Call it fulfillment. Whatever label you give it, seek to possess it. That balance will most certainly preserve you in the midst of difficult leadership decisions. I believe you’ll be in the minority—perhaps even marching to a different drummer.

The third attribute of great leadership is *principle-centered leadership*. And the one individual, in my opinion, who has set the pace, on a global scale, in the research and understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships is Dr. Stephen R. Covey. He asserts that principle-centered leaders identify with and exhibit the Seven Habits. These habits of being proactive—beginning with the end in mind; putting first things first; thinking win-win; seeking first to understand; then to be understood; synergizing; and sharpening the saw—move a person from a paradigm of dependence to one of interdependence. It is a movement from “you didn’t come through and I blame you for the results” to “we can cooperate and combine our gifts and talents for something better.”⁷ They clearly realize that before they can effect change in others, they first must change. Their primary ethic is one of character, not personality. Everyone is blessed by their presence and positive contributions.

Principle-centered leaders cultivate a garden of cooperation, fairness, roles, and vision. They recognize the worth of each individual in the organization, and they know and understand the meaningful, worthwhile contributions each person can make when given a chance. They recognize that the talents of many far surpass those of one, and they foster a climate characterized by that synergy.

I believe that these leaders are experts at the “vital-shift.” As Covey states, “They continually seek to expand the areas over which their people could exercise self-direction and self-control as they develop and demonstrate better insight

and ability.”⁸ As this transition from passive to active followership takes place, leaders can uplift, fulfill, empower, and inspire. They can finally do what they were originally tasked to do—effectively accomplish the organizational mission! Everyone benefits. Everyone grows. Everyone is aligned with the vision.

This leads me to the fourth attribute of effective leaders. They are *visionary*. People with vision possess that unique ability to see beyond the present—the here and now. They are forward-thinking and constantly test the boundaries of contemporary thought and practice. They think “outside the box,” but in such a way as not to lose their perspective on reality. They become the “paradigm busters”—constantly looking for better ways to do business. The visionary leaders despise the status quo and hate the “we’ve always done it that way” syndrome. They take action and challenge others to do likewise. In fact, the more you tell persons of vision “can’t,” the more they pulsate “can” and “will” and “must.”

Joel Barker’s words shout loud and clear at all leaders: “Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.”⁹

When an organization finds itself going in the wrong direction or aiming at the wrong target, the best leaders can make things right again. Covey states,

A strategic leader can provide direction and vision, motivate through love, and build a complementary team based on mutual respect if he is more effectiveness-minded than efficiency-minded, more concerned with direction and results than with methods, systems, and procedures. While all of the procedures are hacking their way through the jungle and their managers are sharpening their machetes for them and setting up machete-wielding working schedules and putting on training programs for machete wielders, an enlightened and courageous leader must sometimes cry out, “Be quiet! We’re making progress.”¹⁰

Conclusion

Are these four foundational qualities of effective leaders incongruent within the military or corporate environments? The question is answered with a resounding NO! To do less is a disgrace. It is not a popularity contest, but a higher calling to leadership excellence.

I believe tomorrow’s leaders will face challenges that will make even the most courageous of people fainthearted and uncertain. But I also believe that only those leaders who demonstrate *followership*, *servanthood*, *principle-centeredness*, and *vision* will ultimately win the race. And those of us privileged to be in their command will share in the victory.

Notes

1. Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnet, and Gordon C. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (New York: Richard D. Irwin, 1993), 225.
2. *Ibid.*, 224.
3. Stephen C. Lundin and Lynne C. Lancaster, “Beyond Leadership . . . The Importance of Followership,” *The Futurist*, 1990, 20.
4. Sheila E. Widnall, “Watch Your Character—It Becomes Your Destiny,” *Airman*, April 1994, 35.
5. Aubrey Newman, *Follow Me* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1981), 107.
6. *Ibid.*, 63.
7. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Fireside Books, 1989), 49.
8. Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Fireside Books, 1990), 180.
9. Joel A. Barker, *Discovering the Future Series: The Power of Vision* (Burnsville, Minn.: Charthouse Learning Corporation, 1990).
10. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, 249.