

THE POWER, NOT THE GLORY

A hot topic of conversation in organizations is leadership. Who has it, and who doesn't have it? When and why is it effective? How do we get it and use it? Where does it come from? What happens in its absence, or when it is misused?

There seems to be general agreement that: Leadership is critical to success. Leadership is a fundamental attribute of people who succeed. Leadership is effective when it draws people towards a common goal constructively. Leadership is lacking or unexpressed in organizations or efforts that have no clear purpose. No one knows where it comes from. In its absence, there is confusion. When it is misused, there is abuse.

There seems to be increasingly general agreement, also, that: Good leaders create synergy and draw out the best in others. Good leaders listen well and develop dialogue around ideas that evolve and change as situations demand. Good leaders can express a vision and direction with such clarity and focus that others are inspired, but can also coach and mentor others who align around that vision – i.e., good leaders can operate equally well at the front of the pack, within the pack and from behind the pack. Good leaders give credit, rather than take credit.

To sum it up: Leaders are articulate, creative, optimistic, flexible, at ease, appreciative and unselfconscious.

The unanswered leadership question, which lurks behind the scenes in every leadership seminar, discussion and lecture, is: Are leaders born, or made? The most current popular leadership theories suggest the latter, that leadership is a learned or acquired skill. The muddle arises when people try to explore the question of HOW it is learned or acquired. Generally, the answers come down to the notion that people have to want to acquire leadership skills, and then learn them until they get “imprinted” into the brain and become automatic. In the ideal, as a concept, leadership sounds wonderful. When it comes down to it, though, it sounds pretty hard to achieve.

But this paradox always strikes me: The very lecturers (one I heard was Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence) who talk about the acquisition of leadership as an effort of will and re-programming actually describe and illustrate examples of leadership with stories about ordinary people who surprisingly rise to the occasion with no preparation. For example, Dr. Goleman, speaking at West Virginia University, illustrated leadership with two powerful examples. First, he told of an uneducated window-washer stuck on an elevator in the World Trade Center with six panicked executives on the morning of September 11, 2001, who saved them all through his calm and certainty, and a series of

insights about how to use the one tool he had with him, a squeegee on a long pole, to get them out of the elevator, through a wall, up through a floor and out to safety. Second, he told of a small old man on a subway in Japan who gently interceded with a hefty, violent, drunk threatening innocent people jammed into a speeding train, and led the man to sit with him and confide in him to receive comfort and solace.

These people didn't plan to be leaders, think of themselves as leaders, attend courses on leadership, or re-program themselves through an effort of will. In a moment of need, they saw the obvious, did the obvious, and naturally expressed leadership. It was there for them and they didn't have to think about it.

A story that always comes to mind for me, since I am one of those people who facilitate leadership discussions, points to the thinking aspect of leadership. In the 1970's, a plane taking off from what was then National Airport in Washington, D.C. crashed into the Potomac River shortly after leaving the runway. It was winter, and there was ice in the river and it was very cold. A contractor passing by with his truck full of equipment saw the crash and immediately wheeled around to the bank of the river and began swimming out with ropes and whatever he could find, saving people who were emerging from the plane. His action mobilized others, and he led a rescue effort later credited with saving many survivors from hypothermia or from drowning. The most interesting moment to those who study leadership came when he was interviewed by a TV reporter after things settled down. He was trembling and terrified. The reporter asked him what was wrong – he had just saved people, inspired others to join in the effort, become a hero ... Why wasn't he happy? He answered, "I just remembered I can't swim."

What if the window washer in Dr. Goleman's first story had remembered that he was merely an uneducated maintenance worker in the presence of highly educated people who were his bosses, and started to doubt his ideas? What if the old Japanese man had remembered that he was elderly and frail and could not defend himself from the assault of a big, violent man? What if the contractor had remembered he couldn't swim *before* he jumped in to save lives?

That could have happened for any of them. It frequently happens to all of us. Anyone can override the wisdom and courage of the moment with the limitations and fears in their memory. Anyone can embrace the wisdom of the moment fearlessly and lead.

If leadership were really elusive, difficult and effortful, wouldn't all the stories and illustrations we all use to describe it focus on people who overcame their timidity or reactivity and studied leadership at length and really worked at figuring it out and practicing, practicing, practicing until it became second nature to them? Why are the stories that inspire and delight us always drawn from the unexpected moments in life when a leader appeared out of the blue, from among the unexceptional people in our

midst? If it were really true that leadership is unnatural and acquired, how could there ever be natural leaders?

It's important, I think, to study anomalies to find new truth, and it's especially important to *notice* anomalies in order to reflect on them. I remember a brilliant lecture I attended one time by a Wellesley psychology professor, Dr. Blythe Clinchy, co-author of the book Knowledge, Difference and Power. Dr. Clinchy began a ground-breaking study of how women learn when she could no longer stand looking at a growing pile of anomalous questionnaires she was throwing into a stack beside her desk as she gathered data to support an operating theory. Finally, the anomalies were too numerous for her to ignore. When she studied them, she found common links that raised unanswerable questions about the theory she was testing and led her to a much more profound and interesting study. The point of her lecture was that it's easy to replicate existing ideas by throwing out whatever doesn't fit, but whatever doesn't fit existing ideas is the breeding ground for new and even more interesting ideas.

It doesn't fit the current models of leadership that window-washers and old men and passing contractors with no special interest in being leaders become our most frequently and successfully cited examples of leadership. It's time to question those anomalies and ask ourselves why those are the stories people remember from our seminars, those are the stories that lead to moments of deep appreciation, or to stunned applause, when we tell them. Those are the stories that resonate with audiences and engage them.

We need to stop describing the glory of leadership, and look to discover and understand the power behind it. It's time to study the anomalies, rather than simply use them to move our audiences. What do natural leaders experience in their moments of leadership? How would they describe their own states of mind? What is the qualitative difference in their own experience when they're expressing leadership, and when they're "remembering" limitations or fears? What do we all have in common that makes it possible for anyone to be a leader – and for anyone not to be?

The more I read and study about leadership, the more persuasive is the anomalous notion that leadership is a natural quality of all people, easily overridden by self-doubts and/or extraneous thinking that have nothing to do with the demand for response in moments that call for leadership. The characteristics of great leaders are human qualities, qualities that everyone can remember exhibiting at various moments in their lives. What if we studied more deeply how to reconnect with those human qualities, rather than how to overcome the thinking that overrides them and impose different thinking over it?

What is leadership, ultimately? It looks like the gift of being awake to the call for selfless service to what is needed now. It is as much the mother's loving voice redirecting a child's energy from danger as it is the executive's clear vision redirecting the tone of a meeting from negativity. Leadership is something that seems to come to us when we're

not trying to be leaders and eludes us when we're figuring out how to lead. It is the power we have when we're not thinking about the glory.

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