

Reflections on Leadership

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Leadership is not a matter of one's I.Q., academic degrees or a prestigious alma mater. It has nothing to do with an imposing physique or deep, well-resonated voice. Heredity, good luck or being in the right place at the right time don't factor in at all.

Leadership does not demand unquestioned loyalty. True leaders are followed by others enthusiastically; without threats, fears or insistence. Those led seek to follow true leaders because they want to, not because they are compelled to.

Leadership is not to be confused with triumph or success. Leaders have to face defeat; but, true leaders are never paralyzed by the prospect of failure. Most importantly, leadership grows from trust. A true leader earns and nurtures the trust of those led.

True leadership is hard to describe, but never mistaken. It is forged from deep conviction in one's values, unwavering ethos, sincere empathy for those led, honesty, and clear communication. Leadership, in its purest sense, cannot be given or bestowed; nor can it ever be taken or assumed. Leadership is honed and perfected through faithful adherence to certain essential, irrefutable and deep-seated principals.

Great leaders are entrepreneurial. They are excellent communicators. They are creative, empathetic, inquisitive, confident, inspirational, authentic and worthy of trust. But are leaders selected or do they emerge? I believe they emerge.

Consider this story that involves a ship, a fierce tempest at sea, the marooning of a handful of vulnerable souls, and a fight for survival. You are one of those desperate souls stranded at sea, occupying the lifeboat with 12 other passengers, a couple of oars, a few bottles of water, a flashlight, and a woefully limited supply of sea rations. When you look around there is nothing but sea and sky. No birds, no wind, no perceptible current. How many of you, at this point, are pretty sure that you need a leader?

The next question is, who should that leader be?

There is some good luck in the makeup of your crew. On board are a graduate of the U. S. Naval Academy, a meteorologist, a marine biologist, an astronomer, and a career scientist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). So, of the 13, nearly half have especially useful skills and experience that can be brought into play.

Which of the 13 will emerge as the leader? What will be that person's plan to bring you all safely to shore?

We have to understand that no one is able to predict, with any certainty, at this early stage and with the information available, which of a number of possible plans will result in the desired outcome. There is no guaranty of success in any plan. Only hindsight – after the outcome is clear – will reveal whether the chosen course was the right one. Before the conclusion of the mission the best you might have is an educated guess.

We must also understand that being right is not part of the definition of leadership. Leadership should never be confused with triumph or success. History has amply demonstrated that great leaders have had to face defeat. The risk of loss is always present, but true leaders are not paralyzed by the prospect.

Once he or she emerges, it will be because of the unwavering conviction of all team members that the leader has the collective best interests of the castaways at heart. In addition, they must feel the assurance that the leader is using *essential leadership skills* to bring the group to safety. These factors constitute the very essence of leadership.

However, before deciding who would be best to lead our beleaguered lifeboat crew, let me first suggest an over-arching principle. In my view, great leaders must be possessed of a delicate balance of personal qualities. Author Simon Sinek tells us:

“There are leaders and there are **those who lead.**”

“Leaders are those who hold a position of power or authority. But, **those who lead** are those who inspire us. ...we follow those who lead, not because we have to, but because **we want to.**” When I refer to *leaders* I am using that term in the sense of Sinek’s description of *those who lead*.

The search for a leader among our imaginary castaways is not limited to the five brilliant professionals I described. That is just a red herring in the story. Any of the 13 in the small boat with the ability to inspire the others, and who is able to earn the trust of the group, may emerge as the leader. And that person will do so not because he or she wants to lead, but because the others *want to be led* by her or him.

Now let’s talk about what I believe are the “essential leadership skills.” Let me offer some thoughts on personal attributes that may not be as readily apparent as the ones I mentioned earlier.

- Leaders are *entrepreneurs*.
- Leaders are *creative*.
- Those who lead are *excellent communicators*.
- Leaders are *empathetic*.
- Leaders have a well-functioning moral compass.
- Those who lead are life-long learners.
- Leaders have faith in themselves and in those they lead.

- Leaders inspire.
- Leaders are authentic.

The last of the “essential leadership skills” I’d like to discuss is likely the most critical and, almost certainly, the most elusive. It is **TRUST**. Great leaders are able to garner the trust of those they lead.

In my view, trust grows from exercising the attributes we have already identified. Think of it this way:

Trust grows when those led have “**faith**” in how and where they are being led.

Trust grows where there is confidence in the capability of the leader.

Trust grows when the interests of the leader and those led align.

Trust grows when the leader keeps promises – unpredictability undermines trust.

Trust grows when the leader is a person of integrity.

Trust grows when the leader communicates frequently, openly, directly, and honestly.

Trust transforms the relationship of leader and followers into more of a partnership; a collaboration toward common interests and goals. Assertion of power or authority is not necessary if trust is strong.

In the end, leadership is all about using a variety of skills to bring others together in pursuit of a common mission. Ideally, a partnership is created so that all work together harmoniously. The leader establishes and supports respect, faith, and trust among all the participants. If done right, the team members are empowered to do their best. Not because they **have to**, but because they **so much want to**.

So who will lead our castaways home? No one can say for sure. But when a leader emerges, the group will surely know it and be encouraged that there is a plan and someone they can trust to lead them.