

THE SIX ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES

- John Di Frances -

Leadership is the foundation for all organizations, whether corporate, nonprofit or government. Leadership is a high calling and responsibility, upon which all else the organization is or does rests. Moreover, leadership is always top down, never bottom up.

Therefore, much has been written on the subject of leadership and many writers and speakers have tried to list those attributes they believe are essential for leaders. However, most often these attempts focus upon traits that make a leader personable, affable and popular. The following six attributes are results of character and personal integrity and as such are deeply seated within those who possess them. They must be developed through self-discipline, time and pressure; they are not inherited; and cannot not feigned, at least not for long. Such attributes are the result of instruction, commitment and a deep concern for what is right, as well as for the best interests of others. They are modeled on a daily basis. Tested and proven in times of trial and adversity. Moreover, they are as precious as gold and equally rare.

Attribute #1 of Leaders – Set High Standards

Leaders set high standards for themselves and those who follow. I am reminded of leaders like Booker T. Washington, who began with a vision, not of what was, but of what could and should be. Born a slave shortly before the outbreak of the civil war, he taught himself to read. As an adult, he saw the need to establish a college for ex-slaves, who were excluded from the existing higher education system. When he first arrived at Tuskegee, AL, where he had expected initial funding and a building suitable to his purpose in founding the Tuskegee Institute, he found only ruins. At this point, most of us would have given up or decided it was not the right place or time, retreating to wait for a better turn of circumstances. Instead Booker T. Washington began by teaching his students to garden, so that they might eat and sell the excess to raise the funds necessary to buy books. Then he taught them to make bricks from which to build the buildings and for sale to raise cash for the other materials needed. Booker T. Washington knew that nothing of true value resulted from any course of action other than by hard work. Indeed, this was his motto and a foundation upon which his students began their education. He set high standards for himself and his students and he expected results.

Attribute #2 of Leaders – Live Your Standards and Mentor Those Who Follow

Leaders live up to the standards they have set and mentor those who are attempting to follow them. Many leaders are consistent in demanding of themselves compliance with the standards that they espouse. Those who do not are only fooling themselves. Nothing disqualifies a would-be leader faster than a double standard, one for them and another for those under their authority. Anyone who thinks that they can maintain such a charade is sorely mistaken. Their subordinates will soon see through their duplicity and loyalty will rapidly be replaced by disgust and only grudging obedience and lip service.

Where most leaders fail however, is in mentoring those who follow. For some reason leaders expect that their followers will learn through osmosis, how to attain to the standards set by their leadership. Certainly, modeling by the leaders is a necessary component of the process, but much more is needed. You do not train a child from infancy on through adolescence by modeling proper behavior alone. It takes consistent, concerted effort verbally communicating not only what is expected, but how. Yet for some reason, most leaders think that merely establishing the standards is all that is necessary. Effective leaders invest themselves into their followers. The best example from all of history is Jesus. He spent three years teaching, mentoring, living out his standards intimately before a dozen followers, who later set the Roman world on fire. In that short three year period, Jesus' disciples came to see, accept and claim His vision as their own and the remainder of their lives clearly reflected His profound impact upon them. He became to them the embodiment of the standards He espoused.

Attribute #3 of Leaders – Create and Share a Vision

Every successful leader must instill the vision of where the organization is going and what is necessary to attain that goal. Without a vision, there is no unity. I am constantly amazed at the number of organizations that continue year after year in a near total absence of vision and therefore unity. In the corporate world, research and development departments create products and services for which there is no market, manufacturing continues to produce items with which customers are dissatisfied, find difficult to assemble and use. Engineering creates designs that are costly and inefficient to manufacture and customer service forces customers to endure a labyrinth of voice mail selections and web site menus that frustrate and confuse customers seeking a “real” person with whom to speak. Even in organizations that tout themselves as “visionary”, all too often this vision extends to only some aspects and functions of the organization. Rarely does it permeate its essence and fully to its core. A splintered vision or one that is implemented in a fragmented manner will always result in competing interests and elements within the organization, vying for resources, each thinking their particular function and sphere of effort is most important. Winston Churchill had an enormous task

in the war years following the demise of the Chamberlin government. How to unify and develop Britain's terrified populace and rapidly dwindling industrial base into a single cohesive force with the will to defeat Nazi Germany, despite the seemingly impossible odds and specter of impending invasion. What did Churchill say at such a critical hour in Britain's history? "I can offer you only blood, sweat, toil and tears", was his call to the nation. He certainly did not sugar coat his message. Britain responded with everything its people had, hanging on through seemingly ceaseless bombings, rocket attacks and finally the Battle of Britain. His words of encouragement, simply: "Never, never, never give up." He possessed a singular vision in those dark days of World War II, before the United States entered the war against Nazi Germany and he communicated it ceaselessly to a nation that hung on by a thread. Effective leaders are driven by a singular vision, not of what is, but of what is to become and they make sure that everyone around them understands and buys into that vision.

Attribute #4 of Leaders – Make the Hard Choices When Necessary

Effective leaders are characterized by a willingness to make the hard decisions when necessary. Gene Krantz, the Apollo 13 Houston Flight Director provides an excellent example. Half way to the moon on a "routine" space mission, an on-board explosion rips the outer shell of the spacecraft, damaging critical life support and propulsion systems. The best solution is also the one that appears most impossible. Continue the mission to the moon and use its orbit as a slingshot to return the three astronauts to earth. The only problem is that they lack the necessary life support and power for a trip that long. Krantz's answer, declare first that no astronauts will be lost on his watch. "Failure is not an option", no matter how impossible the present dilemma appears. Then make the irreversible commitment to the best course of action. The explorer Cortez burned the boats, thus making retreat impossible. Yet it is human nature that at times of extreme crises, the majority want to keep their options open. True leaders, however, recognize that for the organization to reach the desired goal, there must be total concentration on the chosen solution and everyone must know that going back is not an option.

Attribute #5 of Leaders – Be Visible and Out Front

Leaders, to be respected, must be visible. That is visibly out front. The unseen leader is the leader not followed. Visibility is critical and fortunately in our age of global telecommunications, this is easily done. However, being visible and being "out front" are not necessarily one in the same. Marriott Hotels is interesting in their practice of very conspicuously placing a painting of the Marriott's, father and son, in the lobby of each hotel. Why did they do that? Vanity? No. Identity. To both their clientele and staff, this father and son team was present and leading the way, not just from their presence in

their painting, although it was certainly a constant and graphic reminder that someone was actually at the helm. Everyone in the Marriott organizations knows someone is ultimately responsible and furthermore, they know who that someone is. Everyone knows where the buck stops, as Harry Truman would say. In today's far flung organizations spanning continents, in your organization, whatever its size, do people really know where the buck stops? Do they, customers and staff alike, have a clear and constant sense that someone, a real person, not voicemail, is really in charge? And more than in charge, do you see you as their leadership, being out in front, or merely locked away in some ivory tower corporate office, out of sight and out of mind.

General George Patton is a classic example of out front leadership. Old blood and guts George. His men loved him and his men hated him, often at the same time. Patton had a reputation for incurring the heaviest casualties in the opening hours of every conflict in which he engaged, and his troops knew it. They also knew that he had the lowest casualty rates per engagement, because he was unafraid to commit his resources unsparingly and without regard to the lives that would be lost in so doing. He knew that to save the most men from death, he must be willing to endanger the most and yes, send some to their deaths, in some cases, many. His troops also knew one other thing about their leader. That when he sent them into combat, no matter how savage, he, General George Patton, would go with them. Leading from out-front. A habit for which, he was repeatedly subjected to criticism from his superiors. Contrast this with General William Westmoreland in Vietnam. Clearly there were many reasons for the morale problems suffered by U.S. troops during the Vietnam War and no one cause can be singled out as overriding, but the fact that as his infantrymen lay in the muddy rice patties, watching their buddies dying for a cause they did not understand, they also knew that their commanding general was dining daily in Saigon, on gourmet food served on fine china and linen table cloths, served by G.I. attendants wearing starched white waistcoats and white gloves. Patton's response to his superiors when criticized for his exploits at the frontlines of battle was characteristically that, "he knew no way to lead from behind".

Attribute #6 of Leaders – Instill Hope in Those Who Follow

The final attribute of successful leaders is their ability to instill hope. None of us can continue to grow, develop and perform at our highest potential without hope. Hope for success, hope for recognition and reward and most importantly, hope that indeed we can make a difference in the long-term outcome. Hope supplies the essential fuel that enables the human spirit to continue moving forward, especially in the face of severe adversity. This was the context in which President Lincoln spurred the North forward in light of the Union's defeat after defeat in the bloody carnage of the Civil War. A hope that at the end of the long and terrible night, we would emerge once again as one nation and that this time, all men would be able to enjoy the privilege of being free.

Conclusion

We live in a time when cynicism and doubt, especially in regard to leaders and their motives are rampant in every area of our culture, including not only corporate, but also government and nonprofit organizations. Would be leaders, to be effective and ultimately successful, must demonstrate to those they expect to lead, the personal integrity required to develop within themselves these six attributes. To live out these attributes, not perfectly, but humanly, including failing, admitting failure and learning from it. Thereby, leaders can instill within their followers the loyalty and commitment necessary for them to accept the high standards the leader sets, models and mentors; adopt the leader's vision as their own and accept the inevitable hard decisions; for their leaders are out front, visible; providing hope for the future.