



BEING A LEADER: THE PATHWAY TO LEADERSHIP

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Leadership Motives

I have now had the opportunity to teach or consult to leaders from various walks of life for over thirty years, and so I've probably encountered every possible motive in people aspiring to leadership positions. For some people, born in poverty, leadership provides the opportunity to "be somebody." For some, positions of leadership are like mountains to climbers, they are achieved because they are there. A few are driven by the need to have power over others. Others have been trained from their youth to think of themselves as leaders, and to seek leadership; for them, leadership is fulfilling a destiny or plan. There are people who are comfortable only when others are subordinated to them, and power provides emotional safety. Some simply enjoy the process of grappling with ever greater challenges of ever greater risk and complexity. I was at a conference several years ago when a friend asked an executive vice-president why he continued to work when he had all the money he could ever possibly need or spend. His response was, "I have no place to go that offers more interesting and diverse challenges. What would I do that offers more?"

Some leaders simply drift upward, not really knowing why, but simply being moved along by corporate decision makers who choose them for new responsibilities. Some like the perks and status. Some like the enhanced opportunities for creativity. For others it's just a natural progression; as they gain in experience and competence, they move on to positions where they can apply those gains. Some feel that they must do something, make a contribution, and have a positive impact on what is done and how it is done. Some feel a need to be known by others. Others are quite personally pragmatic; they see leadership positions as excellent routes to extrinsic rewards such as income, material well-being, and security. Still others are functionally pragmatic; they see jobs to be done and they do them. By way of contrast some others are motivated by being noticed, standing out in the crowd. Many leaders simply enjoy the process of leading people, of guiding, and being a mentor or coach to others. A few find in leadership a platform for inspiring others, an opportunity to express their charismatic natures. And still others are control freaks; leadership positions offer them power, and increase their ability to control what they personally see as a disorderly world.

Most commonly, leaders are motivated by a combination of these drives and urges. This doesn't come close to being an exhaustive list. Some of the best leaders, Churchill and Lincoln, for example, came to real leadership through crisis, responding to what they saw and felt as a compelling need. In truth, human motive is so complex that virtually any urge could call a person to leadership.

Leadership, a Sacred Responsibility

At the highest reaches of leadership, we find an attitude of profound and sacred responsibility. Great leaders view wisdom, courage, self-sacrifice, and strength of character, as responsibilities

of leadership, and set out to meet those responsibilities. For these people, every opportunity for leadership can properly be understood as containing a great potentiality, one that is realized through the quality of engagement that the leader brings to the position. This is as true of being a little league coach, a member of the school board, or a business leader, as it is of being a spiritual or political leader.

Can we make the claim that all leadership, properly understood, is a sacred responsibility? I think so. First of all, ninety-nine percent of recognized leadership is sanctioned leadership. This means that, through trust, leaders are given resources, power, and yes...people, or through ownership they have acquired the same. The moment one is given or obtains such resources, power, and people, then one's responsibilities go up; and these responsibilities extend beyond the simple and practical. To hold power is potentially to be more dangerous, or more beneficial.

For the purposes of illustration, do a mind experiment with me. Suppose there is a small culture or tribe, and the tribe owns one gun. Whoever is chosen as leader gets to be the sole possessor of the gun and its ammunition, and this leader who holds the gun is deemed to be the sole arbiter within the culture. If you are a member of that culture, what sort of sense of responsibility, what sort of wisdom, courage, and character do you want that leader to possess? While this example is intentionally extreme, it can perhaps help us to understand the relationship of power and responsibility. The greater the power dispensed to, or possessed by the leader, especially relative to that which others hold, the more that we would want that leader to behave with a profound and sacred sense of responsibility. The more power, resources, and people the leader commands, then intrinsically, the greater the responsibility he or she holds.

To wield power is to have influence over the content and quality of others' lives, and to be able to disproportionately shape outcomes that affect others. A person of common sense will quite naturally, knowing human nature, mistrust the concentration of power in the hands of the few. Similarly he will resist being subordinated in any manner that is excessive or potentially dangerous. Power in the hands of the right person can be a public good; power in the hands of the wrong person can be a public menace.

Leadership Barriers

So how should leaders hold this responsibility? Interestingly enough, in my interactions with supervisors, managers, and executives, as well as people occupying positions of leadership in non-business sectors, I repeatedly encounter those whose aspirations for leadership are very high. In seminars and conversations I find that, right out in the open or just below the surface, many or most who hold positions of leadership feel that they are seriously under-delivering on their dreams and desires. The sense of responsibility they feel, and the desire to really do something with the position, are often left unfulfilled. A very large percentage seem to feel soul-dead in their work, stuck and unable to actualize the possibilities for greatness that they know are contained in the situations around them, and lying latent within themselves. Many find themselves entangled in bureaucratic complexity, their time and energy eaten up in the trivia and irrelevancies of organizational life. Others are simply consumed by the practical demands of business, the exigencies of building products and services, of making sales, of attending

meetings, of organizing people and resources, of simply getting the job done. Nevertheless, most leaders I meet feel some yearning to actualize the higher possibilities that leadership offers. But my impression is that in most cases, the lack of desire and commitment, and the giving in to complacency and fear, are what defeat their dreams of genuine leadership.

For most of them there are many practical barriers. Just dealing with the demands of the business, and the demands of personal life, is enough of a challenge. Every day they wake up to face a relentlessly busy pace of life and work. The yearnings for deeper meaning, for a deeper and richer engagement, get pushed aside in order to deal with the practicalities of life--until it becomes a habit to do so. One forty-eight year old upper mid-manager confessed, "I am beginning to think that this is it. I'm nearly fifty years old. I can see myself now doing this for another fifteen years and then retiring. I feel a tremendous emptiness when I contemplate that future, and it scares me that it may come true." I ask him what he intended to do. "I honestly don't know. I have kids going to college, and not enough saved for a secure retirement. Every day at work my time is entirely taken up with just getting things done. The truth is that I never catch up with all there is to do."

This example is not so unusual. Beneath a public facade, a thin veneer of appearing to be fine, this man was facing a collision with himself. Two parts of one person, one very practical and orderly, and the other yearning and searching, were now bumping hard against each other. He was now becoming aware of two powerful and separate urges within himself, not integrated and seemingly irreconcilable. In fact, he was in the early stages of a crisis of meaning. As he could more clearly see the end of his life approaching, that part that wanted a deeper meaning and a much more substantial sense of engagement with life was no longer so willing to be subordinated to practical considerations, to a life defined by ordinary external conditions.

Is there a way out? I suggest that not only is there a way out, a way to live and lead, but that it is a responsibility of leadership to find and express that way. If leaders are subordinating some of the highest and deepest parts of their own beings, then they are designing and leading institutions that demand such subordination from others. The net effect of such leadership is to build cultures, organizations, and institutions that are dead...lacking in both spirit and imagination.

What do Leaders do?

A great leader looks into the future and imagines. In business this becomes the core of a strategic vision, and is the foundation for moving the company into the future. The strategic vision becomes the centerpiece of the direction of the company, and is the primary element around which company people and resources are organized. At lower levels of the company the strategic vision is translated into goals for business units, teams, and individuals.

Leaders articulate that strategic vision. They begin the process of transferring it from their own minds into the minds and workings of the organization, so that it becomes a shared conception. Many of them are utterly religious in communicating that vision; they preach, explain, enroll, persuade, and use every other imaginable communication device, personal and organizational,

to spread the word, to achieve shared understanding and commitment. They build purpose, direction, and focus. They work to flesh out the vision, and they add substance and detail. The best of them inspire others by embodying the vision; they provide someone and something around which others can organize themselves, and their thoughts and efforts.

They work to create order and coherence, to build a meaningful whole, a means for people and resources to meet the challenges and opportunities contained within the strategic vision. They demand that people aim higher, perform better, and deliver more. They ask people to turn the vision into reality. They help build a map through the complexity and confusion, and chart the way through difficulties. They work to build the culture that is needed for achieving the vision. They build and enforce networks of accountability that are critical to achieving the vision.

They recollect the past, and stand with one foot in the present and the other in the future. They seek to describe, in a meaningful way, the movement from the past into the present, and the present into the future. They grapple with the complexity of time, the big picture and the details, and they work to arrive at an integrated and coherent conception that can be communicated to all relevant and interested parties. They communicate purpose, values, and vision. All of this is as true of the little league coach as it is of the CEO of a major corporation, the difference being only in scope and complexity.

We are rightly inspired by Churchill's call to sacrifice, by Roosevelt's challenge to fear only fear, by Mother Teresa's life of humble devotion to Christ and service, by Lincoln's translation of death into heroic metaphor at Gettysburg. But we also can remember that in the most common and mundane circumstances the potential for leadership exists. The little league coach, the teacher leading the group of students to learning, the supervisor hidden in the 100,000-person corporation, in all these arenas exists the possibility for great leadership. The question for each of us as leaders is whether we will rise to the occasion.