

# PERSPECTIVE on LEADERSHIP

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For several semesters, I taught a course on leadership as part of the M.B.A. program at St. John Fisher College. Approximately thirty students and I spent the semester reading and talking about leadership. Several community, business, and religious leaders spent time with us discussing their views on and their experiences of leadership. As I reflected on that learning experience, I wrote this essay to share some of what we learned.

## Leadership Defined

In its simplest terms, leadership is the process of influencing the behavior of another person while fully respecting the freedom of that person. Two aspects of this definition are important. First followers are essential to effective leadership. Unless followers allow themselves to be influenced by a leader, no one can exercise effective leadership. No matter how skillful a leader is, no matter how much power a leader has, no matter how well-liked a leader is, a leader is not effective unless people freely choose to behave in ways consistent with the objectives of the leader. A good follower then is not a compliant, docile person who will effectively carry out the decisions of a leader without questioning them. The best followers are autonomous, empowered, and self-confident people who can allow themselves to be open to the influence of others. The key to effective group action appears to be a sense of ownership by all members of the group. This ownership is not achieved by a strong leader and a group of obedient followers, but rather by a group of strong members who are influencing each other toward common goals. And so we can conclude that the equality of the follower determines the effectiveness of the leader.

Second, while specific leaders may have the authority and power to force compliance from followers, leaders who exercise that authority and power to coerce may obtain the desired behavior, but have not achieved it through the exercise of leadership. This may be perfectly appropriate in times of crisis, but it is the exercise of coercion, not leadership. The important difference is not in whether or not the desired behavior was obtained but in the motivation and attitudes of followers. People who have been coerced or manipulated resent those responsible and do not feel good about themselves. As a result, they are less likely and less able to respond to true leadership in the future. Leaders who begin to use force, coercion, and manipulation must later use more force, coercion, and manipulation precisely because their ability to influence - truly lead - is diminished.

I believe that there are times in the life of a group or organization when the formal leader appropriately exercises the authority of his or her position to deal with organizational issues. For example, a group member who consistently violates fundamental group values and who steadfastly refuses to engage in the two-way communication necessary for mutual influencing may need to be separated from the group. Specifically, if a fundamental value of an organization is truth-telling and an individual consistently does not tell the truth, refusing to change his or her behavior in response to appropriate influences the formal leader may appropriately terminate the employment of that person. When this becomes necessary, it is important that fair and

equitable procedures are followed and are perceived by other group members to have been followed. It is also crucial that the leader communicate through words and actions that this necessary exercise of coercive power does not signal a basic change in leader behavior.

## **The Importance of Leadership**

Leadership has probably never been more important to our organizations and communities than it is today. Our ability to take collaborative action has become central to our social and economic health. Our notion of a leader as a strong individual who knows best, makes crucial decisions, and tells others what to do, is no longer consistent with our understandings of human behavior and our values of human dignity and freedom. Our society's mistrust of authority should not be confused with a mistrust of leaders -- mistrust of leaders who do not respect our freedom and instead rely on authority, power and manipulation. Our realization that leaders do not necessarily act in our best interests has made us less compliant to exercises of authority and more needful of true leadership.

## **Characteristics of Effective Leadership**

Given these new realities, what can we say about true leaders, those who influence our behavior while fully respecting our freedom? Through our class discussions and the reflections of the learners in the class, I came to the following conclusions about the characteristics of leaders.

### **Leaders respect the dignity and worth of each follower**

There are two behaviors which are key to this. First, such leaders do everything possible to reduce status differentials in groups and communities. Status based on socioeconomic factors and job titles can probably never be eliminated from human groups, but leaders must work to de-emphasize those differentials rather than emphasize them. Second, leaders must make clear by their behavior that they value and respect all followers, especially those who are less powerful, less healthy, less educated, younger, older, poorer, less skillful in communication, and different in race, language, religion, gender or sexual orientation from the majority.

No leader can be successful in influencing the behavior other people unless those followers trust the leader. The cornerstone of that trust is the confirmed belief that the leader values each follower and is guided by what is fair to all.

### **Leaders are learners.**

They learn from success, but they especially learn from their failures to which they freely admit. Leaders are constantly searching for the truth; they are open to reality even when that reality does not accord with their notions of what reality is or ought to be. They can see things as they are and they are not frightened of the change which that

view of reality will cause in their own thinking. Leaders are not ideologues, though dictators typically, are.

### **Leaders empower their followers.**

The simplest way to understand the notion of empowerment is to appreciate that everyone in a group or community exercise leadership - not just the formal leader. This occurs in an environment in which leadership is not seen solely as something which the elates as to the rest, but in which everyone can legitimately exercise influence over others. Leaders must work diligently to create such a climate and to arrange the group or societal processes to nurture the leadership potential of all members, especially those who might be traditionally excluded from leadership. This is not as much a question of sharing power as it is of developing the capacity of each follower to influence the behavior of others in empowerment is seen only as sharing power, one is actin out of a model of leadership which relies on coercion and manipulation.

### **Leaders have a vision of how things can be different and better.**

By definition, leaders are concerned about change if one is trying to influence the behavior of another one does so out of some dissatisfaction with the current or likely behavior of the other. One seeks to change that person's behavior. The direction and content of leadership behavior must be guided by a vision of how things can be not just different but butter. That vision of how things can be better must have the following characteristics. There must be an authenticity about the vision based on a clear consistency with the leader's own persona values - not just espoused values, but values which can be clearly seen in the leader's personal behavior. That vision must be clearly communicated in both the words and personal behavior of the leader. That vision must be drawn from the values of the followers. That vision must draw people together around the fundamental values which give meaning to the lives of the individual members. A charismatic leader is not someone who creates a vision and then uses it to lead people, but rather someone who draws on the values and meanings of the followers to articulate a common mission which provides meaning and direction to the group.

### **Leaders include rather than exclude.**

A friend of mine, Don Carew, from the University of Massachusetts, has done important research in the area of teamwork. He saw a poster in an elementary school which communicates an important attitude of an effective leader. "*None of us is as smart as all of us.*" Effective leaders must facilitate the contributions of all followers. Only in this way will the group or community be able to identify its true interest and goals and be able to work effectively to achieve them.

### **Leaders do their homework.**

Leadership is always task-specific. Leaders influence other people with regard to specific issues, challenges, behaviors. In order to influence other people, therefore, leaders must do their homework on the issues or challenges. Leaders must develop and understand information on the specific issue and must be aware of the attitudes and positions of those they desire to influence. Leaders who do not do their homework often are forced to rely on authority and coercive power which moves them away from effective leadership.

### **Effective leaders must be able to deal with ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict**

The number and rate of cultural and technological changes that characterize our world require leaders whose intellectual outlook and personal character enable them to operate effectively in confused and conflicted situation. This ability to act in such situations communicates a sense of confidence and potency to followers.

### **Idealism and Pragmatism - A Necessary Combination**

In short, effective leaders today can be characterized as pragmatic idealists. They must have a clear sense of values about the importance of all individuals and have the skills and understandings needed to influence the behavior of others while fully respecting their freedom. It is not enough to be a visionary. It has often been observed that there is no shortage of people with good, even revolutionary ideas; there is a shortage of people with good ideas who are able and willing to do the hard, pragmatic work of putting those ideas into practice. If I have a vision of how things ought to be, but I am not willing to engage in the work of leadership - listening, learning, empowering, taking risks, and driving relentlessly for real implementation - I will be irrelevant, a "hopeless idealist," "a fuzzy-thinking liberal," or worse. On the other hand, if I am skillful at implementing ideas without a clear sense of direction, I will become a "technocrat," able to get things done, but not knowing what things to do or not do.

### **What Is Needed Now?**

Our challenge is to do what we can to make sure that our organizations and communities have men and women who are ready and able to exercise the leadership described here. In the past, perhaps, we could wait for economic or political success to identify our leaders. Today's realities require that we invest in the development of future leaders.

As an educational institution, Fisher has an important role to play in the development of leaders for our business organizations, non-profit organizations, schools and agencies and for our communities. I see three implications for our College: First, we must model this view of leadership in the administration and management of the College. We must make clear that leadership is not simply being in a position to tell others what to do, but being in a position to create a "culture of leadership" which seeks to develop the leadership potential of all members of the academic community. Second, our educational content and approach should respect the dignity and freedom of students. As students become more experienced and capable, they should likewise become more

autonomous and empowered. We must make it clear that we listen to students and learn from them. Third, as a College and as individuals, we should become involved in the broader community in ways that increase the leadership potential of all members of that community.

### **In Conclusion**

Each member of our M.B.A. class began the course last semester wondering if she or he could become a leader. Most often students posed the question, "Do I have what it takes?" During the time we spent together, each one came to the realization that he or she could, in fact, be a leader. By the end of the class, we had learned not only that each of us could be a leader, but that *all* of us could be leaders. More important, unless *all* of us are leaders, our life together in communities will be less than it could and needs to be.