

Leadership for the Rest of Us

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All of us carry pictures in our heads of archetypal leaders: Hercules, Sun Tzu, Harriet Tubman, Lincoln, Churchill. As humans we are moved by stories of leaders who seize power, act boldly and change the world. Hundreds of thousands of books on leadership have been written in recent years, and most celebrate the mystique of The Leader – the visceral allure of his or her vision, charisma and courage.

As a boy in Rensselaer, Indiana, in the American Midwest, I learned to think of humanity in two types. There were leaders – the Roosevelts, Churchills and Trumans (as well as Hitlers and Stalins) – and there were the rest of us. The leaders' job in the face of a collective challenge was to figure out what to do and point the way. The role of the rest of us was to follow (particularly those leaders we elected).

Today my view of leadership – shaped by 30 years as a facilitator – is more complex. I am impressed by a different leadership capacity: the ability not to seize power but to share it. A leader who shares authority, I believe, demonstrates a more important form of courage. Rather than dictating an elaborate vision, this leader is willing to mold one through dialogue with the rest of us.

This capacity is rare: the leader's willingness to learn in public, to be shown where he or she is wrong, to bring together disparate voices to find a solution that serves the common good. Working with leaders who have had to forge consensus to get results, I've seen the power of this more subtle leadership: not leader as awe-inspiring hero, but leader as partner. The qualities of this leader matter, but the quality of the relationship between leader and the rest of us matters more.

Leaders who are truly brave, in my experience, acknowledge the limits of their perspectives and expertise. Instead of charging ahead, they convene leadership conversations – open-ended dialogues with the rest of us about our collective challenges. These leaders don't limit their overtures to those who agree with them or report to them. Instead they are willing to venture into the worlds of those who see things quite differently, whose very existence may be a threat to their power and stature. This is a special, especially courageous, brand of leadership.

Why is this capacity especially important today? Because we live in what futurist Raymond Kurzweil calls the "age of acceleration," when the pace of change is increasing exponentially and doubling every few years. Solutions that worked yesterday are obsolete today. No one leader can see the whole of a problem, much less its solution.

Moreover, the global problems of volatile economies, terrorism, pandemics, and climate change are unbounded in their impact. People today are so interdependent that any faction focused on winning may find itself losing at the next turn. For solutions to be sustainable, they must work for a wide range of stakeholders with different needs and perspectives.

Old forms of leadership have given us much of what is unsustainable in the world today: health care spending, fossil fuel dependency, population growth, the gap

between rich and poor. What are the alternatives? We don't know yet what will work for all. We don't know what is possible or how to measure success or discover the best solution. And it is at this point of not knowing that a new leadership model can emerge.

Today's leadership challenges do not require a heroic commander who knows just what to do, entrancing though that archetype might be. What is needed, instead, is someone willing to ask questions, listen deeply, harness the creative potential in divergent views, and wrestle publicly with alternatives. The leader must facilitate (1) mutual understanding and (2) the discovery of common ground, and (3) shared commitment to priorities that work for all of us.

This is all the more true when, as in all global leadership challenges, there is no supreme leader. Consider the interwoven dilemmas now facing the entire human population: There is no Queen or King of the World to settle the debate. Compliance cannot be ordered. Only shared commitments, offered freely by the rest of us, will bring progress.

A partner-leader comes to understand a leadership challenge through leadership conversations – one-on-one, in small groups, and in large, public summits. The leader's experience and insight matter; the leader's view needs telling, not as a monologue but as a piece of dialogue.

The often quoted Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu (6th Century, B.C.) made a distinction between good and great leaders, the latter being essentially invisible. "The good leader is he who the people revere," he said. "The great leader is he who the people say, 'we did it ourselves.'" The great leader listens and makes it possible for the rest of us to learn and act.

Only a few of the leadership books discuss how poorly most leaders, even the good ones, do at listening and learning. Chris Argyris writes of the defensiveness of many recognized leaders, who fear open inquiry and public learning – and the exposure of the limits of their competence. The leaders whose vulnerability is most crucial in the search for genuine solutions may be least able to offer it. And, unfortunately, most organizations and educational institutions encourage leaders to project what they know, rather than to learn what they don't.

As Peter Senge has written:

School trains us never to admit that we do not know the answer, and most corporations reinforce that lesson by rewarding the people who excel in advocating their views, not inquiring into complex issues (1990, p. 25).

Leaders traditionally have been rewarded for certainty and achievement, not for learning and partnership. The results can be disastrous. Edward Smith, captain of the Titanic, was too concerned with breaking the record for crossing the Atlantic to listen to reports of icebergs. Financial leaders dismissed concerns about deregulated lending, and an unprecedented, global meltdown of industries and entire economies has been the result.

Most important, the partnership approach to leadership requires a different kind of followership. Leaders won't be comfortable expressing uncertainty, listening, and learning unless the rest of us allow them to be unsure, releasing them from the myth of all-knowing leadership. A leader can't be a partner without an active community that is itself committed to learning. Enmeshed with the failures of Captain Smith and financial daredevils are the failures of followers who knew their leaders were wrong but didn't insist on being heard.

For leaders to be partners, followers (the rest of us) must step up. There are important precedents for this in modern history. When labor unions asked Franklin Roosevelt for what became the Wagner Act, he said, "I agree with you. I want to do it. Now make me do it." And they did. When Martin Luther King Jr. launched a series of demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, he pressured John F. Kennedy to advocate for the Civil Rights Act, despite its political risks.

When problems are difficult, stakeholders alienated, and solutions elusive, leaders must be willing to follow and followers (the rest of us) to lead. Leadership need not originate from individuals in positions of great power. Divorce lawyer Stuart Webb became a leader in a world-wide transformation of family law practices as a sole practitioner. Weary of the poisonous acrimony in his cases, he found colleagues willing to work as partners to develop a new, non-adversarial form of divorce, Collaborative Family Law. Divorcing spouses come to agreement through conversation, not litigation.

Markos Moulitsas Zúñiga created dailykos.com, the popular forum for progressive debate, but he shares in the conversation, rather than directing it.

Partnership is required not only in the search for solutions but also in their implementation. Peter Drucker has described leadership as figuring out the right thing to do and management as doing the thing right. Leadership and management require different but complementary conversations for learning and acting. Managers, like leaders, must see themselves as partners too, learning alongside the rest of us.

As human beings, we may always be captivated by stories of the expert, visionary leader. But we must make way in the world for leaders who do not know what to do but call on others to help them learn what "we" want and take action together.