A Follower's View of Leadership

Albert DeSimone Jr.

University of Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, Higher Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.
I have led, and I have followed, and there have been times when I have totally lost the perspective of my position. These lost times have made me contemplative on the topic of leadership; they have honed my viewpoint as I have had to question the most fundamental aspects of leadership to regain perspective. My wonderings, musings, observations, research, study, and self-mediated debates—although never to hear the final rebuttal—have yielded two radical characteristics of leadership.

Leadership and leaders—the embodiment of leadership—exist to effect positive change. If we were all satisfied with the way things are in the world, there would be no need for leaders. We would still need managers to oversee the individuals who maintain the status quo, and we would still need supervisors to oversee the tasks and processes associated with that maintenance.

But, of course, we’re not satisfied. We see endless possibilities for continuous improvement and change. Part of this is based on our baser requirement for survival, and part based on our human desire to strive toward perfection in most any endeavor we pursue.

Something that has impressed me most about effective leaders is their ability to lead change while preserving stability within the changing enterprise. I draw upon the automotive industry for a prime example.

The story of Studebaker has always fascinated me. Studebaker produced American automobiles from the early 1900’s to the mid 1960’s. The company was formed in the 1850’s, and produced wagons and carriages before transitioning to automobiles. Studebaker was the only manufacturer of wagons and carriages to transition to a top-ranked automobile producer. John Mohler Studebaker embraced the change, knowing that only through this change would the company survive. This culture of change-driven leadership was reinforced after World War II, when Studebaker was the first company to introduce new styles as opposed to re-introduced pre-war models. Even at the company’s imminent demise, Studebaker introduced the Avanti in 1962. It was heralded as a stylistic breakthrough. Unfortunately, it did not save the company; however, as a testimony to the appeal of the automobile, replicas continue to be produced 40 years after Studebaker closed its doors.

What a comprehensive legacy of leadership – transitioning to automobiles, surviving the Great Depression and World War II, competing against much larger automobile manufacturers, and fighting to the very end. I’m certain that John Mohler Studebaker and many of his successors could teach us a great deal about introducing change while preserving stability in unstable times.

Leadership is mostly learned, and it is a life-long learning and teaching endeavor. We should all accept
that we will never be the fully actualized leader. There will always be requirements for change, which means there will always be opportunities to learn.

I recall a personal incident, when I was well-taught by a colleague of mine on the subject of learning and leadership. As a member of the senior leadership team in the University of Georgia’s premier Information Technology division, I was informed that I would be attending a leadership seminar. After grousesing a bit about having to attend yet one more leadership seminar—foolishly thinking that I had all the leadership skills I would ever need—my friend and colleague made a very insightful comment. “Even Lee Iacoca,” said my friend, “needs a refresher course every now and then.”

These words, among many others, have guided my learning, now grounded in these two fundamental principles:

You learn more from following then you do from leading. Consider this principle a natural corollary to “you learn more from listening than talking.” By following, observing, and most importantly, being receptive to mentoring do we learn most from those who lead us well. To lead, then, becomes the practice of what we have learned by following. Leading is not possible without following, and following well those who teach us well.

You can learn from “bad leaders” as well as “good leaders,” but you can always learn more from good leaders. It has become rather cliché to say that you can learn as much from bad leaders as from good leaders. I am, however, someone hesitant to even use the phrase “bad leaders.” In fact, I believe there are no bad leaders. There are true leaders and false leaders. Individuals in positions of authority who understand their responsibilities and function, who understand that they serve whom they lead by creating and supporting a climate of sustainable, secure, change-driven success are true leaders. All others are simply those in a position of authority who do not understand their role and purpose.

While you can certainly learn how not to do things from a false leader, you learn much more from a true leader. The key reason, again, is mentoring. Those who lead well mentor well; they give of their knowledge as they give of themselves to those whom they lead. Leaders are never selfish of their knowledge, wisdom, time, experience, or expertise.

And besides, who strives to attain a “Worst Practices Award”? It is, of course, the best practices we learn from and do well to apply.

The Attributes of Leadership

From these two basic characteristics of leadership I have derived the following associated attributes of leadership. Though a number of common themes run throughout these attributes, which characterize true leaders as multi-threaded, diverse thinkers with vision and passion who create an emotional connection that creates a society

of supported and sustainable change within an organization, a number of differences between management and leadership also emerge.

It has been my experience that we all understand that there is a very fundamental difference between
leadership and management; however, it seems just as universal that we have difficulty articulating those differences. Simply stated, and I believe the following attributes support, the most fundamental difference: Management is a contract among people; leadership is a bond.

Leaders understand the difference between

change management and

change leadership

Change management is improved process enablement focusing on statistics and measurements to improve products and services to increase customer satisfaction.

Change leadership focuses on the culture and the people responsible for effecting the change. Creating a climate conducive and accepting of change is one of the most crucial and significant roles of a true leader.

True leaders create this climate in a variety of ways, and perhaps one of the most significant is through the creation of harmony throughout the enterprise with the understanding that the road to excellence and success is often contentious. Having been a change agent responsible for leading change, and having been led by others who wished to institute changes I questioned, I have observed that the root of all dysfunction is discord. I have equally observed that the basis for sustained success is harmony.

This harmony comes through a clear articulation of the value of the change for the entire enterprise. Change is translatable into growth, success, and excellence, and the true leader focuses on these outcomes of change in every communication. If every person responsible for every process affected by the change understands the change, and to some degree owns the change, harmony replaces discord, dysfunction is eliminated, and excellence and success are imminent.

Leaders hear voices

I am quite fortunate to have been exposed to a quality management approach known as Six Sigma. While steeped in manufacturing philosophy and language, the underlying premise of Six Sigma is translatable to a relatively simple premise: listen to your customers and design efficient processes to deliver defect-free products and services to your customers based on their specifications and needs. The obvious result, of course, is increased customer satisfaction.

In Six Sigma parlance, there are the voices of Six Sigma—the voice of the customer and the voice of the process—and a true leader hears these voices. And the true leader hears yet another voice.

Leaders hear what people do not say. Silence is never consent, as I have often heard. Silence can be many things: tacit agreement, passive aggressiveness, or a lack of understanding. Silence should never be construed as acceptance or agreement, and certainly not passionate acceptance or agreement. People are never passionately silent, and a true leader will always delve deeper into the voice masked by silence.

Leaders are articulate
Leaders express themselves directly and clearly articulate mission vision, values, goals, and expectations. I will never forget the words of my first supervisor in the field of Information Technology: “People put things into computers because they want to get things back out of them.”

This is perhaps not the most eloquent of statements, but one that has resonated with me throughout my 24-year career as an Information Technology professional. He articulated the mission of customer service in a single, simple, unambiguous statement.

Leaders are more than good communicators; they use both verbal and non-verbal communication to assist those whom they lead to fully understand the objectives of the organization. Their communication style is direct, unambiguous and, most importantly, non-subliminal.

A more recent leader of mine under whom I had the pleasure to serve had a similarly direct statement regarding his communication style: “What you see is what you get, and sometimes that’s unfortunate.”

You knew where you stood as a person and employee with this leader, and there is no substitute for honesty and clarity of direction from those who hold a position of authority.

One of the most effective messages was President John F. Kennedy’s directive to place a man on the moon. It is a story often told, but fundamental to understanding leadership. The mission and goal so permeated NASA during the 1960’s that everyone was on board. As the story goes, a NASA janitor busy plying his trade by mopping a floor was once asked what he was doing. He promptly replied, “Putting a man on the moon, sir!”

Leaders relish the success of others

I recall an incident from my younger, more precocious days, when the ideas for organizational improvement flowed from me with little filtering. Many were quite well received and others were not as well received as I had anticipated. Bringing this fact to the attention of my immediate supervisor at the time, he informed me that “perhaps some people don’t like their horse smarter than they are.”

After recovering from the sting of having my contributions reduced to equine status, I understood how unfortunately correct he was. At the same time, I have learned how true leaders do not fall victim to this fallacy. True leaders show genuine, sincere pride in the success of those whom they lead. They have learned that the success of others is a reflection of their own success, and they freely allow credit to be absorbed and enjoyed by those who deserve it most.

There are few actions that jeopardize fulfillment of an organizational goal or objective more than jealousy of individual success. Each individual success is a component within the overall team success. And each individual success is a reflection of the quality of the team and the team’s leader, and move the team and its leader closer to achievement of the goal.

I firmly believe that greatness is never a stand-alone achievement; it is always a collective achievement by good people working well together with mutual respect and admiration for one another’s
contributions to the overall attainment of the stated goal.

Leaders value what other people value

I have often heard that managers should understand what those whom they manage value, and use this as a motivational tool. While this is certainly a valid management tool, it is not the perspective of the true leader.

Leaders have a much different level of empathy with the values of those whom they lead. I was taught this lesson well by a co-worker and friend soon after being placed in my first director-level leadership role. I was the leader of a small group of communications professions, mostly writers and media specialists. One individual in this group was serving as my associate director, and I had been his subordinate for several years before he then became mine. And to fuel the volatile situation, the individual and I had a rather contentious relationship long before our roles were reversed.

I was feeling rather pleased with myself, as I had handled the situation well, as had my new subordinate. Within the year, the subordinate decided to retire. I felt that I had fulfilled my professional and organizational responsibility and had no desire to plan or in any way involve myself in a retirement celebration.

This is when my co-worker and friend stepped in. He informed me very quickly that a retirement celebration had NOTHING to do with me and EVERYTHING to do with those with whom the new retiree had worked. I listened more to his admonition and I realized how right he was.

As a leader, I recognized that it was important for me to value what others value, in this case the significance of the ritual and symbol of retirement recognition over my sense of satisfied responsibility. It is often incumbent upon the leader to set aside what is of value to him and embrace what is of value to others. By valuing what others valued, I was able to honestly, with no sense of hypocrisy, plan and participate in a well-attended and very pleasant retirement celebration. Of infinitely greater significance I learned that, when it comes to what other people value, being a true leader is “all about you and not about me” within, of course, one’s acceptable moral and ethical priorities.

Corollary to this attribute is a subtle difference in a traditional characteristic of management that does not translate well to leadership but does underscore the empathetic motivational style of true leaders. Managers, it is commonly held, get work done through others. Leaders, on the other hand, get work done with others. One technique does not invalidate the other, but each indicates the difference in the role of the manager and the leader. Managers are, and should be, focused on short-term attainment of goals within time and quality guidelines as articulated by leadership. Leaders, on the other hand, are focused on the long-term goals, as well as the cultural health of the organization. Building relationships, and creating a climate conducive to this relationship building, is accomplished through camaraderie (with) not directive (through).
Leaders organize complexity

Complexity, I have learned over the years, is nothing more than a significant number of simple and sometimes conflicting actions that must work together. Understand, and effectively organize, the simple actions and their interactions, and a seemingly complex problem is resolved.

These actions are like threads, with each thread contributing to the overall fabric of the solution to a complex problem. True leaders are multi-threaded thinkers.

The threads woven by the true leaders are described well in the book Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership. Bolam and Deal characterize organizational thinking in terms of four frames: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. Not to grossly oversimplify their work, but each is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>clear and well-understood rules and regulations regarding organizational responsibilities by everyone within the organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>the relationship between the organization and the people who execute within the rules and regulations which govern their responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Bolam and Deal use the term “arena” to describe this frame, which acknowledges that decisions are made with sometimes hidden agendas, a drama carried out sometimes in the back room where personal interests and organizational interests collide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic</td>
<td>the ritual, ceremony, myths and stories of the organization, along with its customs and culture and the heroes and heroines who have created those customs and culture throughout the organization’s history</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaders exercise a method of organized thinking that accommodates a continuum from the scientific, concrete, unambiguous, and tangible to the artistic, abstract, ambiguous, and intangible. These frames are one representation of that continuum, moving from the science of structure to the magic of symbols to govern decision and direction.

In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” the poet T. S. Eliot refers to an unfortunate “dissociation of sensibility” of art and science that took place during the English Restoration. True leaders have re-associated their sensibilities.

I was mentored once in the game of pocket billiards of a similar requirement for organized thinking to understand complexity. Though certainly not as complex as charting the strategic direction of a Fortune 500 company, the game has its subtleties and complexities with the most common being the positioning of the cue ball in proximity to the next object ball after striking the initial object ball.

Shooting shape, as this is called, sets up not only the next shot but subsequent shots while considering
the possibility of positioning your opponent in a difficult spot in the event that you miss your initial shot. Perhaps not rocket science, but a skill nevertheless.

As a very fine player was watching me shoot once, he commented:

You have a fine shot, and you make a lot of balls. The problem is that you are trying to shoot shape and missing the ball you are shooting at entirely too much. This is what you need to do: instead of trying to position the cue on a dime, start thinking in quarters of the table. Your shot is good enough that if you get it in the right quarter of the table, you’ll make your shot. When you get good enough at that, start shooting in eighths of the table, and go from there.

The pocket billiards expert and the authors of Good to Great give us the same lesson: categorize, simplify, and approach decision-making by moving fluidly between frames, both scientific and artistic.

Leaders are humble

I was introduced to the book Good To Great: Why Some Companies Make The Leap…and Other’s Don’t by Jim Collins in a leadership discussion with work colleagues. Collins characterizes the Level 5 leader—the highest level of leadership by his metrics—as “a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.”

As interesting a conclusion as this is, and as much I appreciate Collin’s observation, I don’t find it at all paradoxical. Professional will is complemented by humility. Humility makes us receptive to learning and mentoring. Success requires this receptiveness, and the product of professional will is success. Just as greatness is never a stand-alone achievement, neither is success. It is realized in concert with those from whom we have learned, and those we have taught well.

One of the more endearing qualities of true leaders is this humility, and I have noticed that those whose leadership skills I have admired most view the accolades of leadership as a reflective quality. Leaders are never self-validating; they allow the honor to be attributed to them by others.

Leaders embrace diversity

True leaders
genuinely seek out diversity of opinion and viewpoint before making any decision. When they ask your opinion, they expect to hear it; they are not seeking confirmation or validation of a pre-conceived solution or decision.

This Six Sigma-like approach to problem solving—approaching a problem without a pre-determined solution in mind—will do more than result in new and creative solutions to problems; it will engage the individuals within the organization. Individuals and their associated groups, however diverse or disperse, will be a part of the solution. And if the solution requires change, which it very often will, then these same individuals will become a part of the change.

True leaders go about this process of seeking diversity of opinion and viewpoint in such a way that it
does not compromise their ultimate responsibility to make the final decision. One other “seemingly paradoxical” nature of true leaders is their ability to be simultaneously decisive while being receptive to different viewpoints. It is the responsibility of the true leader to be the final point of accountability for the decisions made and the direction taken. And this responsibility is meticulously balanced by the ability to absorb and evaluate multiple inputs in an effort to make the best decision possible.

In her novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot creates an image that beautifully describes the role of the leader as the centering force of diversity:

Your pier-glass, an extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling into an exclusive optical selection.

True leaders are those who make the scratches, the differences, the viewpoints—sometimes myopic and sometimes universally apparent—shine, and shine through their brilliance of focus. They are those who set the final course and ensure that all voices have been heard, all concerns have been reckoned with, and the final decision reflects the goals and aspirations of the clearly articulated organizational objectives.

Leaders have appropriate operational understanding of their business

I realize that a phrase such as “appropriate operational understanding” is a qualitative term in need of some sort of qualification for more direct meaning. I also realize that leadership has failed as a consequence of not having “appropriate operational understanding” of the business being led.

Either too much or too little operational understanding tends to lead toward micro-management—the former as a consequence of the “we have always done it this way” attitude and the latter as a consequence of having to become overly involved in processes in an effort to acquire sufficient understanding to be comfortable with high-level decisions. Micro-management also results from the reverse of a very popular adage: Those who can’t teach … do. Leaders with appropriate operational understanding of their business are better mentors and work well in the teacher-becomes-learner-then-teacher paradigm.

There is, then, an appropriate medium. For the sake of proper quantification, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is no operational understanding of the business at hand and 10 is immense understanding, a leader should be in the 4 to 6 range. And a great true leader will choose confidants, directors, and associates that clearly fill in gaps on both sides of this mid-range.

I turn to baseball managers as a prime example. For years, it has always interested me that the most successful baseball managers are typically drawn from the ranks of the marginally successful baseball players. To substantiate that observation, I researched the careers of the 15 managers currently in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Not one had a playing career worthy of the Hall of Fame.
Leaders have disciples

Leaders create a climate of discipleship that fosters a culture of discipline. The word discipline has many meanings and connotations, but my favorite definition is training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character.

Change requires such discipline, and true leaders create disciples by molding and inspiring others. By concentrating on the rewards of success, not on the consequences of failure, leaders create an environment where discipline is never demanded and always freely given. Through their words, actions, behavior, commitment, and passion, true leaders imprint on those whom they lead not only their professional wisdom, but their ethical and moral values.

My best experiences of following have been through discipleship. As a disciple, I was an engaged follower. I not only believed in the direction or the change being implemented, I wanted to talk about it, spread the word, and proselytize. Recall the janitor from NASA. He was truly the engaged follower; he took the opportunity to speak to the long-term goal, not the present task.

Leaders are firmly gentle

Dale Carnegie said it best in his book How to Win Friends and Influence People:

The use of gentleness and friendliness is demonstrated day after day by people who have learned that a drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall.

True leaders seem to always find the gentlest approach to dealing with problems in the workplace. They have learned that a caring, person-centric response to a workplace issue always yields the best long-term results. “A humane heart and a strong one; soft of speech and manner,” said Thomas Carlyle, “yet with an inflexible rigor of command.” I have a prime example from one of my first jobs, some 30+ years ago, which demonstrates the effectiveness of firm gentleness.

I was 18 and working my way through college as a dock hand in a textile mill during the summer and after classes. Periodically, about once every 3 months, visited upon us like the plague was the arrival of the railway box car. When the box car arrived, about half of the dock hands were assigned to fill this box car with old rags and other non-saleable remnants of cloth. As one can well imagine, a most odious task.

There was, however, a known fact that those who dressed in the best clothes on “box car day” were least likely to be selected for box car duty. When the word would leak out that the box car was coming, those of us who had been on the dock long enough knew it was time to step up the attire.

On one particular day, the word was out that the box car was coming the next day. Secure in the knowledge of my sartorial subterfuge, I dressed accordingly.
But it didn't work. I was placed on box car duty, and none too happy about it. I groused, I complained and worked myself into a tizzy. When I had had all I could stand, I stormed off, with my supervisor, Al, gently trying to calm me down. The reward for his efforts was a crumpled time card thrown in his general direction.

A few days later, and a realization that I had it pretty good where I was, I wanted to come back. I knew I was going to have to swallow my pride, obsequiously asking for my job back. I wasn’t happy about it, but I knew what I had to do.

When I arrived at my old job, I saw Al. I will never forget what he did. He saw me, smiled, and picked up the phone. He called the front office and said, “Cathy, send Bert’s time card down.” (It was actually a new, straight one.)

“You ready to get to work,” said Al.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

And that was all there was to it—on the surface. The next time the box car arrived, I came to work ready to work on it, and I even volunteered for the job. I will never forget the look Al and I exchanged on the dock that day. He had taught me well that I had an obligation to my place of employment, that he was indeed “the boss.” And he did it in a way that preserved my self respect, and my endearing respect for him.

Leadership is a Never-Ending Journey on a High Road with Many Forks

A very dear friend of mine once said to me that “one rarely regrets taking the high road.” Though speaking in terms of moral and ethical behavior, which is indeed the behavior to be expected of the leader, it struck me that this is the position of the true leader. The true leader is the pinnacle of responsibility for the ethical and moral culture of the organization, as well as its sustained success.

It is as President Harry S Truman said: “The buck stops here.”

Or as Hopper said in A Bug’s Life, “First rule of leadership, everything is your fault.”

And back, once again, to President Truman, who said “The President—whoever he is—has to decide. He can't pass the buck to anybody. No one else can do the deciding for him. That’s his job.”

This high road is a road of many forks, and leadership requires decisiveness when these forks are encountered. Baseball player (and Hall of Famer) Yogi Berra offers simple, practical advice for decision making. Berra says, “When you come to the fork in the road, take it.” Famous almost as much for his baseball success as unique use of the English language, Berra is telling us, in his own way, that, when faced with a decision, make it. Seek the advice and counsel of your colleagues and confidants, consider the ramifications of your decision, accept the responsibility of your decision, and learn from your mistakes. Change leadership requires action, and not to decide is a denial of your fiduciary
responsibility of those whom you lead.

I challenge you all, to stop, look, and listen and, most of all, follow. Follow well those ahead of you, and look for opportunities to follow those whom you lead. When the time comes to lead change, embrace it, and embrace it with others.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]