

Leadership in Turbulent Times

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What is a Leader?

Leadership is difficult to define with precision. We know it when we experience it; often we are made most aware of it by its absence. Each of us has our own set of criteria to describe it, yet we often respond to leaders emotionally rather than critically.

Traditionally, Western culture has viewed leaders as “born, not made.” Historically, it was a privilege of class and breeding, although exceptional people such as Joan of Arc were seen as leading through the inspiration of a higher power (godly or demonic). More recently, leadership has been described as a set of traits or competencies that can be learned or developed. Behavioral scientists have identified leadership as a series of roles that can be shared within a team. Business consultants have distinguished between leadership and management by saying that management does things right and leadership does the right things. Warren Bennis said, “...[it is] the difference between those who master the context and those who surrender to it.” Still, leadership remains an elusive quality or set of qualities and skills.

Leadership styles differ from culture to culture and from generation to generation. In most cultures with a written language, we can find definitions and discussions of leadership. For example, the Tao te Ching says:

“As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear, and the next, the people hate. When the best leader’s work is done, the people say, ‘we did it ourselves!’”

Lao Tzu

“If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain.

If you want ten years of prosperity, grow trees.

If you want one hundred years of prosperity, grow people.”

Chinese proverb

A leader is a person to whom others turn for direction, inspiration, moral authority, or support. No title, however grand, confers the qualities of leadership on anyone. Leadership is earned, person by person, through behaviors that qualify in the minds of others as leadership behaviors. In the end, a leader is someone whom we trust to guide us toward a shared future.

Four Styles of Leadership

These four styles of leadership are derived from the work of the Tibetan sage, Milarepa, who described four ways to lead—noble, peaceful, fascinating, and stern.

- **Noble:** The noble leader leads by example and moral authority; he or she represents by his or her actions the highest expression of the values and principles by which the organization governs itself. The Noble leader is admirable and meritorious. He or she is seen as impressive, heroic, extraordinary; one who is virtuous, valorous, and incorrupt. Many people view Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa as Noble leaders. The basis of their leadership is moral authority (although the people who worked most directly with Mother Teresa also characterized her as stern).
- **Peaceful:** The peaceful leader leads through nurturing and supporting the people and creating an environment where they can be their best and highest selves. The Peaceful leader is serene and steadfast, characterized by a quiet dignity, a gracious and caring manner. Bishop Tutu of South Africa is nearly universally thought of in this way, as was Mahatma Gandhi. Their leadership is founded on trust—both trustworthiness and trust in others.
- **Fascinating:** The fascinating leader leads through stimulating the hopes, imagination, and dreams of the people and enabling them to see a vision of the future. The Fascinating leader may be either charming or charismatic. Ronald Reagan, Tony Blair, and Bill Clinton typify the charming leader—engaging and appealing (to those who elected and support them). Jack Kennedy and Martin Luther King exemplify the charismatic leader—energetic, dynamic, and vigorous. Their leadership is based on attunement to others or a shared vision. These leaders are the “great communicators,” able to tap into common hopes and dreams.

*“You see things and you say,
‘Why?’ But I dream things that
never were and I say, ‘Why
not?’”*

George Bernard Shaw

- **Stern:** The stern leader leads through reminding the people of their duties and responsibilities and calling them to account for their actions or lack of action. The Stern leader is strict and rigorous. He or she is seen as shrewd and authoritative. Margaret Thatcher and Charles de Gaulle, among recent political leaders, best fit that profile. George W. Bush, especially after September 11, has made speeches that are good examples of stern leadership, although some of his campaign speeches exemplified a more ‘peaceful’ style.. Stern leaders lead based on the strength and certainty of their commitment and convictions.

In today’s complex organizations, the successful leader must know how to lead in all of these styles and when each of them is most appropriate. For example, during a crisis, when time is of the essence, the stern leadership style may help move people to focused action. When there are decisions to be made that require good judgment, the noble style may be of greatest value. When relationships and morale are highly important, the peaceful style is called for, and when people lack energy or alignment, the fascinating style can transform a situation.

Leadership and Power

Power is the potential for action. There is a power base for each of the leadership styles: moral authority and wisdom for the noble leader, empathetic understanding and interactive skills for the peaceful leader, charisma and creativity for the fascinating leader, and respect and temporal authority for the stern leader. If the legitimate power base does not exist in the minds of the people, they will not be led.

Leadership and Influence

Leadership is expressed through the skills of communication and influence, as well as by example. We respond to leaders based on the strength, timeliness, and situational appropriateness of their communication. We look to leaders especially when we are lacking something or when the leader provides something for which we hunger. When we are confused and lack a sense of what is right, we look to the noble leader. When we are in need of support and encouragement, we look to the peaceful leader. When we lack inspiration and goals, we respond to the fascinating leader and when we lack direction and simply don’t know what action to take, we long for the stern leader.

“Leadership appears to be the art of getting others to want to do something that you are convinced should be done.”

Vance Packard

Certain communication and influence skills are especially associated with each style of leadership, although they can all be used in a variety of situations. Here are some examples of how the behaviors from *Exercising Influence*¹ might be expressed through specific leadership styles.

The Noble Leader

- **Suggests**

“I recommend that we include everyone in that decision.”

- **Offers reasons**

“Doing so will ensure that we are all operating consistently”.

- **Refers to shared values**

“We have a commitment to making important decisions together, by consensus. This is a very important issue.”

- **Discloses**

“I want to acknowledge that I have been wrong about this issue in the past. On reflection, I think there is a better solution.”

The Peaceful Leader

- **Asks open-ended questions**

“How do you think we can solve that problem? What ideas do you have?”

- **Draws out**

“Tell me more about your idea. How do you see that working?”

- **Checks understanding**

“So you are willing to negotiate with the other team on that...”

- **Encourages**

“I am confident that you will succeed as you have done before with tough issues like this.”

“Leadership is action, not position.”

Donald McGannon

¹*Exercising Influence: Building Relationships and Getting Results* is a copyrighted program of Barnes & Conti Associates, Inc.

The Fascinating Leader

- **Envisions**

“I can see us operating like a world-class relay team, bringing the project in on time and winning the race to market.”

- **Offers incentives**

“If you are willing to be part of this effort, I will make sure you have all the help you need”.

- **Tests implications**

“You haven’t said so, but your comments indicate that you might be thinking about a way you can contribute to this effort.”

- **Identifies with other**

“If I were you, I’d be both excited and apprehensive right now—we are starting something so important to the future of this company.”

The Stern Leader

- **Expresses needs**

“It’s time to act. Let’s move on this right away.”

- **Describes consequences**

“If you cannot deliver what you have agreed to do by next week, I’ll need to assign someone else to do it.”

- **Clarifies issues**

“On the one hand, you say you are ready to commit to the project, yet on the other hand you say you are too busy to set a starting date.”

- **Poses challenging questions**

“How do you plan to deal with that problem?”

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

John F. Kennedy

Communication and influence have both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Nonverbal aspects include facial expression, posture, gestures, tonality, and intangibles like mutual respect, trustworthiness and the impact of the leader's own behavior. Those who are acknowledged as leaders, whether formal or informal, will only have the trust and respect of others if they "walk their talk"—demonstrating the values, actions, and behavioral norms they ask of others.

Acceptance of Leaders

For influential communication to be effective within a specific leadership style, the following questions must be answered in the affirmative. These are "screens" which people use to decide whether or not to trust and accept someone as a leader.

The Noble Leader

- Does she share my values?
- Does he "walk the talk"? Are his behaviors consistent with his words?

The Peaceful Leader

- Does he care about my welfare?
- Is she skillful in managing relationships?

The Fascinating Leader

- Is she truly enthusiastic about the idea? Does she really believe in it?
- Is the idea or vision inclusive and exciting enough to be meaningful to me?

The Stern Leader

- Does he seem confident about what to do?
- Is she respected by people whom I trust?

"Not the cry, but the flight of the wild duck leads the flocks to fly and follow."

Chinese proverb

Leadership in Turbulent Times

Turbulent times call for courageous leaders—leaders who are willing to move out of their own comfort zone, to confront tough issues, to challenge “common wisdom.”

In these complex and challenging times, leaders need to be attuned to the situation and the people involved and able to use the leadership behaviors that are most likely to be effective under the circumstances. This ancient model for leadership behavior reminds us that there is no one right way to lead; that the “best leaders” may be the most flexible ones.

“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.”

Niccolo Machiavelli, 1532