

Your Leadership Is Unique

Good news: There is no one "leadership personality."

by Peter F. Drucker

I have been working with organizations of all kinds for fifty years or more—as a teacher and administrator in the university, as a consultant to corporations, as a board member, as a volunteer. Over the years, I have discussed with scores—perhaps even hundreds—of leaders their roles, their goals, and their performance. I have worked with manufacturing giants and tiny firms, with organizations that span the world and others that work with severely handicapped children in one small town. I have worked with some exceedingly bright executives and a few dummies, with people who talk a good deal about leadership and others who apparently never even think of themselves as leaders and who rarely, if ever, talk about leadership.

The lessons are unambiguous.

The first is that there may be "born leaders," but there surely are far too few to depend on them. Leadership must be learned and can be learned ...

The second major lesson is that "leadership personality," "leadership style," and "leadership traits" do not exist. Among the most effective leaders I have encountered and worked with in a half century, some locked themselves into their office and others were ultragregarious. Some (though not many) were "nice guys" and others were stern disciplinarians. Some were quick and impulsive; others studied and studied again and then took forever to come to a decision. Some were warm and instantly "simpatico"; others remained aloof even after years of working closely with others, not only with outsiders like me but with the people within their own organization. Some immediately spoke of their family; others never mentioned anything apart from the task in hand.

Some leaders were excruciatingly vain—and it did not affect their performance (as his spectacular vanity did not affect General Douglas MacArthur's performance until the very end of his career). Some were self-effacing to a fault—and again it did not affect their performance as leaders (as it did not affect the performance of General George Marshall or Harry Truman). Some were as austere in their private lives as a hermit in the desert; others were ostentatious and pleasure-loving and whooped it up at every opportunity. Some were good listeners, but among the most effective leaders I have worked with were also a few loners who listened only to their own inner voice.

The one and only *personality trait* the effective ones I have encountered did have in common was something they did *not* have: they had little or no "charisma" and little use either for the term or for what it signifies.

What leaders know

All the effective leaders I have encountered—both those I worked with and those I merely watched—*knew* four simple things:

1. The only definition of a *leader* is someone who has *followers*. Some people are thinkers. Some are prophets. Both roles are important and badly needed. But without followers, there can be no leaders.

2. An effective leader is not someone who is loved or admired. He or she is someone whose followers do the right things. Popularity is not leadership. *Results* are.

3. Leaders are highly visible. They therefore set *examples*.

4. Leadership is not rank, privileges, titles, or money. It is *responsibility*.

What leaders do

Regardless of their almost limitless diversity with respect to personality, style, abilities, and interests, the effective leaders I have met, worked with, and observed also *behaved* much the same way:

1. They did not start out with the question, "What do I want?" They started out asking, "*What needs to be done?*"

2. Then they asked, "*What can and should I do to make a difference?*" This has to be something that both needs to be done and fits the leader's strengths and the way she or he is most effective.

3. They constantly asked, "What are the organization's *mission* and *goals*? What constitutes *performance* and *results* in this organization?"

4. They were extremely tolerant of diversity in people and did not look for carbon copies of themselves. It rarely even occurred to them to ask, "Do I like or dislike this person?" But they were totally-fiendishly-intolerant when it came to a person's *performance*, *standards*, and *values*.

5. They were not afraid of *strength* in their associates. They gloried in it. Whether they had heard of it or not, their motto was what Andrew Carnegie wanted to have put on his tombstone: "Here lies a man who attracted better people into his service than he was himself."

6. One way or another, they submitted themselves to the "*mirror test*"-that is, they made sure that the person they saw in the mirror in the morning was the kind of person they wanted to be, respect, and believe in. This way they fortified themselves against the leader's greatest temptations-to do things that are popular rather than right and to do petty, mean, sleazy things.

Finally, these effective leaders were not preachers; they were *doers*. In the mid 1920s, when I was in my final high school years, a whole spate of books on World War I and its campaigns suddenly appeared in English, French, and German. For our term project, our excellent history teacher-himself a badly wounded war veteran-told each of us to pick several of these books, read them carefully, and write a major essay on our selections. When we then discussed these essays in class, one of my fellow students said, "Every one of these books says that the Great War was a war of total military incompetence. *Why was it?*" Our teacher did not hesitate a second but shot right back, "Because not enough generals were killed; they stayed way behind the lines and let others do the fighting and dying."

Effective leaders delegate a good many things; they have to or they drown in trivia. But they do not delegate the one thing that only they can do with excellence, the one thing that will make a difference, the one thing that will set standards, the one thing they want to be remembered for. *They do it.*

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