

Authentic Leadership: A Personal Philosophy

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I am your servant. I do not come to you as a leader, as one above others.

These words were uttered by Nelson Mandela several years ago, and serve as an important reminder of how one individual maintained his dignity and integrity while being incarcerated for 27 years as a political prisoner in South Africa. Mandela's own leadership journey continues to serve as an inspiration to people around the world. His ability to rise above the inhumane treatment from his jailers and others in positions of power at the time reflect authentic leadership.

The purpose of this article is to share some of what I have learned over 15 years as a student of leadership, and to challenge you, the reader, to take the time in the weeks ahead to reflect on your own personal leadership and to ask yourself the question: "Am I an authentic leader?"

I have studied the question of what do we mean by the word 'leadership' over a long period of time. Is it something that each of us can develop, or is it the domain of only a few. Many writers on the subject argue that leadership can be learned. I'm not quick, however, to reject the older school view that leadership is something with which people are born. For example, it was Aristotle who made the comment: "From the moment of their birth, some are marked for subjugation, and others for command."

Many of the contemporary thinkers on leadership reject that leaders are born. But I believe that this is what I'll call the pendulum effect, in which people jump onto a new theory after abandoning an older one. Now, it's argued that everyone can be developed into a leader.

I've identified an approach to address the issue of who possesses leadership in an organization or a community. It consists of two types of leadership: Big L and Little L. My personal view is that only a few of us will ever have the dynamic leadership behaviors and skills to lead organizations, private, public or non-profit, large or small, or the populace of a country, state or province. Only a few of us have what it takes to be a Big L leader.

What propelled people like Winston Churchill, Mohandas Gandhi, Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, and Nelson Mandela to be world-class leaders? For those who are sports-minded, consider the great athletes like Bobby Orr, Billy Jean King, Wayne Gretsky, or Mohammed Ali. Or how about such vocalists as Aretha Franklin, Céline Dionne, or Beverly Sills?

These individuals possessed an innate talent and drive that propelled them to succeed. Why do some children at a very young age show an incredible skill in a certain discipline, yet other children work hard but only attain a certain level of proficiency?

To lead an organization, especially in today's turbulent world, requires someone with unique abilities. Some of these can be learned. But there needs to be an inner drive and vision that causes that individual to want to lead others. This raises the issue of power and status, for which many people strive in their efforts to rise to the top.

Power can be an important component of effective leadership, provided it is used properly and for the right purposes. When top leaders abuse power by controlling and manipulating their subordinates, then these are not Big L leaders. They may be good managers, but when it comes to inspiring people and leading with integrity, they fall short of achieving this.

The late Peter Drucker believed that leadership must be founded upon a constitution. Otherwise, irresponsibility will result. He made the following powerful statement some years ago:
I am amazed that today's prominent writers on leadership do not seem to realize that the three most charismatic leaders in all recorded history were named Hitler, Stalin and Mao. I do not believe that there are three men who did more evil and more harm. Leadership has to be grounded in responsibility. It has to be grounded in a constitution. It has to be grounded in accountability. Otherwise, it will lead to tyranny.

Drucker was an advocate for shared leadership. He believed in employee responsibility and the need for a "self-governing community," where individuals and teams share in many managerial activities. This brings me to the concept of Little L leadership.

This is the leadership we see displayed throughout organizations and community. It is the day-to-day acts and behaviors that people at all levels engage in. However, there are those who just are not interested in showing leadership behaviors, or at least for the time being. That's okay. Some of them will gradually come on board, while others will continue to want to be led by their peers and managers. This brings to mind a quotation from physicist David Bohm: "The ability to perceive or think differently is more important than the knowledge gained."

This is a key point to remember when reflecting on our personal leadership styles and potentials. It comes down to each of us being authentic in how we conduct ourselves. We need to strip off the facades we wear and own up to our weaknesses, limitations and warts. When we're honest and open with ourselves and others, we gain greater confidence and self-respect, plus respect from others. Be true to yourself and others will be true to you.

I'll share a personal example. When I was in my early 30s I was promoted to manager of a team of economists. While I had the technical skills and knew the work, I had zero management training. Because of my own insecurities and wanting to do a good job, I became a bit of a micro manager. That was until a couple of the young economists straightened me out. It took a while but I learned to eventually let go and share the leadership within my branch. I was still the managerial leader, but the people with whom I worked certainly took a lot of initiative and consistently demonstrated leadership in their own ways. There's no magic formula or cookie cutter approach to this. Each of us has to find our own way. In my case, I had to fall on my nose a number of times.

Here are three questions you may wish to reflect on when it comes to developing your leadership skills:

1. What are my strengths and weaknesses? (Be honest with yourself)
2. What do I need to do to be more adventurous and risk-taking?
3. How can I inspire others to want to work towards a common purpose?

I'll share one piece of advice, something I've learned: If you want to inspire others (an essential part of leadership), you need to be passionate about your cause.

I recall watching a PBS program a few years ago that looked at the head surgeon of an emergency room in a large US city. As you can imagine, an ER can be an extremely hectic and stressful place in which to work. People have to know their duties and understand the interdependency of their efforts.

What struck me most about watching the surgeon (a middle age Black man) was his calmness in dealing with highly stressful situations in the midst of chaos - multiple victims of car accidents and victims with gunshot wounds. As he stated to the journalist: "My staff look at me to keep it together. If I lose it, they lose it." When his shift finished, where did he go? Home? No, he went to do volunteer work with inner city Black children. For me, this man showed exemplary leadership. But this prompts the question: was this Black man born as a natural leader, or did he develop his leadership skills over time?

Each of us needs to see our personal quest for leadership as one that first starts with the discovery of who each of us really is. We need:

- To know ourselves,
- To hear ourselves,
- To tell the truth to ourselves,
- To be honest with ourselves.

Once we address these questions and reexamine our values and beliefs, we'll be ready to move forward in our leadership journey. Yes, leadership skills can be learned. But the first step is a process in which we look inside ourselves.

This journey is a very personal and private one. We may or may not wish to share with others along the way. However, one thing needs to be clear and that is every leader must go through it.

Authors Kouzes and Posner express this beautifully when they state:

You can't elevate others to higher purposes until you've first elevated yourself....You can't lead others until you've first led yourself through a struggle with opposing values....A leader with integrity has one self, at home and at work, with family and with colleagues. Such a leader has a unifying set of values that guide choices of action regardless of the situation.

Here are four excellent questions they pose to help facilitate the leadership journey:

- What are my values and beliefs on how people should operate in the organization?
- How strongly am I attached to my values and beliefs?
- How strong is my relationship with those I lead and with whom I work?
- Am I the right one to be leading at the moment?

The last question is especially important in my opinion. It gets at the heart of the shared leadership issue. Regardless of one's "position" in the organization, there are times when one steps forward to lead and times when one steps back. As Kouzes and Posner state: To step out into the unknown, begin with the exploration of the inner territory. With that as a base, we can then discover and unleash the leader within us all.

And with those closing words I'll leave you, the reader, to reflect upon what I've shared – and to ask yourself, “Am I an authentic leader?” Don't be shy; take the plunge!