

THE LEADER, THE TEACHER – LEADING FROM WITHIN

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I have been asked what I would liken the leader to. One good model would be the shepherd.

THE SHEPHERD LEADER

The shepherd serves as a guide, provider, and protector. Sheep know exactly who their shepherd is and follow their shepherd. More importantly, the shepherd knows his sheep; he guides them to pasture and to water, and protects his flock from thieves and predators.

When thinking of shepherding, we often visualise the romantic picture of a shepherd with a lamb across his shoulder and think that his favourite sheep gets the privilege to be carried around. What often eludes us is that, more than likely, the lamb is being carried around because it has a broken leg — a leg broken by the shepherd himself!

There are dangerous places a sheep should not go to. If a sheep gets into trouble, the shepherd uses his staff — the cane with a hook at the end — to get the sheep out of danger: He puts the hook around the leg of the sheep and pulls it out. There are, however, lambs that do not learn fast or learn well, and they keep getting into dangerous situations. So sometimes the shepherd breaks the leg of the lamb in order to teach it a lesson it will not easily forget! Shepherds too have to exercise “tough love” to discipline their sheep; this is as much their role as is being a protector, and fending off predators and thieves. And you can be sure that if any sheep should stray from the flock and get lost, the shepherd will exercise every effort to find the sheep and celebrate the rescue each time it happens.

There is a very real parallel between a shepherd and a good leader, in terms of the requisite care, guidance, provision, and protection — so many bosses fail even at this level! But this is only the base level for good leadership.

What should the best leader be doing? A great leader should be making good things happen, which on their own would not happen, and he or she will, in the great majority of cases, have to accomplish this through people: bosses, peers, and most of all, subordinates.

The test of great leadership is not only that good things happen and many things get done while the leader is around; the true test is the legacy that a leader leaves for the sustained and continual success, progress, and development of the organisation. In short, a leader’s most critical contributions are what still remains when the leader is no longer around.

This is not to say that successful performance while the leader is in charge is not important: Success is always important, but great success is to be judged by what endures in the thinking, values, and beliefs of the organisation and its staff, even if the practices would have to change with time and circumstances.

Every one of us likes to succeed, and all of us like to feel good about ourselves. There is nothing more motivating than to discover that we are able to do things well and to stretch ourselves beyond our perceived limits to reach our potential. Indeed, life becomes exciting and energising when each

new accomplishment becomes evidence that we can do more than we had imagined possible, and we realise that we have limited ourselves in what we imagine we were capable of.

We seek bosses that allow us to learn, stretch, and discover ourselves. We seek leaders who seek to make us leaders. Not everyone has the same innate capabilities but each of us can be a leader in our own sphere, at our own level, and in our own right.

Very often when things need to get done and people are somewhat sceptical about whether they would get done, they often cite that what is required is “buy-in by top management” and “leadership by example”. Most times when they say this, they are in fact softly voicing criticism of the current leadership. But more than that, they wish for a chance, in due course, to be leaders themselves.

FOUR STAGES IN THE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

An interesting question is where the leader should be leading relative to his people. I posit four stages in the leadership development process:

- Leading from the front
- Leading from the side
- Leading from behind
- Leading from within

Leading from the Front is where most people expect their leaders to be. When anyone is first assigned a new appointment it is essential that the leader leads from the front to demonstrate competence, willingness to do whatever he or she is asking his people to do, ability to guide, capacity for empathy, as well as commitment and passion for the job. It is only natural for the people in an organisation to “test out” new leaders before they commit their followership to them.

However, leading from the front is only a starting position. It will not generate the next level of leadership, and is not what their people fundamental wish for — which is to taste success for themselves, and realise their potential.

Leading from the Side: Once the leader has earned trust and credibility with his people, he has to consider moving from “leading from the front” to “leading from the side” to serve as the pacesetter and the standard bearer. This means helping his people get things done, and giving them the opportunity to try and to learn so as to discover what they are capable of, and more importantly, to taste the sweetness of success for themselves.

By insisting that your people learn to do things themselves, and always being there for them to provide help, guidance, support, and protection so that they are able to perform with confidence, the leader builds the self-esteem and self-confidence of the next generation of leaders.

Leading from Behind: After leading from the side, the leader should next move to “leading from behind”. This formulation of leadership might sound strange but is actually an essential step to building confidence and generating the next leadership.

When you lead from behind, your people are left to get on with the task, discover things for themselves, and even make mistakes along the way; but you are constantly there to monitor what they are doing and to bring to their attention potential pitfalls and new challenges that might surprise your staff. Rather than providing step-by-step directions to his or her people, the leader helps them discover the way forward and, in the process, grow as individuals and as future leaders because they are energised by the challenges, but are never allowed to be overwhelmed by them.

Leading from Within: Leading from the front, then moving to leading from the side, and then leading from behind are the interesting stages involved in establishing oneself as a worthy leader and helping generate the next leadership, but the ultimate goal in generating leaders is to be “leading from within”. This means that the leader has so successfully implanted values and generated capability, capacity, confidence, attitudes, and ways of thinking that the leader has developed the next generation of leaders that would be best able to lead the organisation in the future.

This process of leading from the front, to leading from the side, to leading from behind, to leading from within, can perhaps be more simply visualised as the process of moving from “I do, you watch” to “We do” to “You do, I watch” to “You do.” It is the ultimate gift the leader can offer his people. Seen in this way, the leader as shepherd is a valid but inadequate model. I think the much more appropriate model is the leader as teacher.

THE LEADER. THE TEACHER.

There is something very special about being a teacher, which makes the profession distinctly different from any other.

The most critical difference between teaching and working virtually anywhere else is this: The more the student surpasses his or her teacher, the greater the success of the teacher, whereas in the office, the higher a person gets to in the organisation, the more successful he is deemed to be — so we need not be surprised with bosses who work hard at keeping their people down.

The idea of success itself is totally different for a teacher. It is a definition that is focused on the success of others, not the success of one’s self. I applaud everyone who has dedicated his or her life to be a teacher, for whom teaching is not a job or an occupation, but an honourable vocation and a higher calling.

Teaching is an enormous privilege, a great responsibility, and an unparalleled opportunity to do good for the lives of others. I am always inspired when the teacher does not say I teach science or mathematics or literature, but simply says, “I teach children.”

“Moulding the future of our nation” is not an empty slogan of the Ministry of Education; it truly reflects the power in the hands of the teacher to make or break lives.

If a leader sees his role not just to lead well for today but to build well for the future, his best contribution then is as a teacher — identifying potential, recognising effort, encouraging ideas, pursuing excellence with a continuous drive for the organisation to be the best it can be and the people to be the best they can be. His best role is therefore to be a teacher *par excellence*, whose concern is first and foremost the success of his people.

I my 45 years of working experience, I have found people to be much the same everywhere: They want to succeed, they want to feel good about themselves, they want to be self-confident, and they want to contribute towards the performance and development of their organisation. They seek leadership that is forward-looking, competent, empathetic, energising, courageous, and above all, focused on developing their people to be the best that they can possibly be, and to enable them to go as far as they possibly can.

The real question is: Where is such selflessness in the leader to come from? Well, it really goes deep into our inner motivations; leadership, at the end of the day, is a matter of the heart.

Laozi (老子), the ancient Chinese philosopher, cast the challenge of best leadership as helping others grow, to the extent that the leader does not even get any credit: “As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honour and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate. When the best leader’s work is done, his aim fulfilled, the people will say, ‘We did it ourselves!’”

May you choose wisely the leader you want to be!

"太上，不知有之；
其次，親而譽之；
其次，畏之；
其次，侮之；
信不足焉，有不信焉。
悠兮其貴言。
功成、事遂，
百姓皆謂：我自然。"
(老子道德經第十七章)

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