

LEADERSHIP: DEFINITION, IMPORTANCE AND QUALITIES

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What does it mean to be a leader? Is it the title: *President, Chairman, General* etc? To me, it's more than that. Titles are important...no doubt about that, but they don't have much value when it comes to leading. True leadership cannot be awarded, appointed or assigned. Leadership is not primarily a formal position. There have been great leaders who did not hold high positions—for example, Martin Luther King, Jr. It comes only from influence and it has to be earned. Being a leader in a mass of people is more than just having the name “captain”. In other words, you don't need a title to lead. In fact, you can be a leader in your family, in your neighbourhood, or in your society, all without having a title. *It's not the position that makes the leader; it's the leader that makes the position.* However, it is also true that people who are awarded, appointed or assigned leadership positions, have a key role to play in society, and if true leadership is not within them, then at least some effort is needed to build their leadership capacity or else the teams they lead are doomed.

To me, a leader is someone who demonstrates extraordinary dedication to his or her team, and will do whatever it takes to better the team as a whole. A leader infuses a sense of positivity and directs others to reach a specified goal. Thus, to use Northouse's definition, leadership is '*a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal*'.¹ The goal must be attained through mutual cooperation and cohesive behaviour. The ends of leadership involve attaining results through others, and the means of leadership involve the ability to build cohesive, goal-oriented teams.

Leadership is more often about “soft skills” rather than hard skills. Knowledge is power and naturally, for those who believe power is the essence of leadership will assume that those who possess more knowledge and intelligence will make good leaders. This is not always the case, and you may find brilliant scientists and philosophers whose ability to think is so high but whose ability to lead is very low. Yes, a knowledgeable leader who understands what drives the bottom line is valuable. However, it is the leader who can get others to perform at their best who ultimately creates a winning team. Good leaders are therefore those who build teams to get results across a variety of situations.

A few things are more important to human activity and its outcomes than leadership. The weakest link in government, in a business, in a movement or even in a family is leadership. Leadership helps our nation through times of peril, makes a business organization successful, and enables a movement to fulfil its mission. Leadership of parents enables children to grow strong and healthy and become productive adults. It is not technology; it is not tools or equipment; it is not facilities; it is not the skills of employees; it is not systems and procedures; It is leadership. Without leadership, things drift along. They go where they want to go, and in most cases following the path of least resistance even if it is a path of destruction. Without leadership, a group of human beings quickly degenerates into argument and conflict, because we see things in different ways and lean toward different solutions. Leadership helps to point us in the same direction and harness our efforts jointly.

I have to point out however that leadership can be used for good or ill. Adolf Hitler, one of history's most notorious dictators was a leader of the German people, who set an evil direction. Many would argue that he had great leadership skills, but he put them to terrible use. Sometimes people in business use leadership skills to exploit others. Sometimes people in charitable organizations use leadership skills to benefit themselves rather than the people they are supposed to help. So leadership can be misused to pursue bad ends.

I believe the supreme quality for leadership is *integrity*. It reflects a deep commitment to do the right thing for the right reason, regardless of the circumstances. Leaders with integrity are incorruptible and incapable of breaking the trust of those who have confided in them. However, I also believe a good leader must possess a combination of many varying qualities. A great leader should have *integrity, vision, courage, humility, creativity, conviction, trustworthiness, fairness* to mention but a few, all of which are crucial leadership qualities. Leadership can and should be situational, depending on the needs of the team or society at any particular time. For that reason, the relative importance of a particular leadership

¹ Northouse, Peter G., "Leadership: Theory and Practice" (2010).

quality will depend on the prevailing situation, and the style that is being employed. Is leadership being applied to a young or to a mature society? Is it a stable or conflict ridden society? Is it business, government or a movement? While in some situations you might need more of a visionary leader, in others a “courageous” leader might be what you need most. The essential qualities for an authoritative leader who simply says “*come with me*” might differ from a democratic leader who builds consensus through participation. Great leaders therefore choose their leadership style with a calculated analysis of the matter at hand, the end goal and the best tool for the job. If you look at some of the world’s greatest leaders...the likes of like Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela, who led masses, gained appreciation, are held in high regard for their work, and their lives inspire many, you will notice that they have varying degrees of the different leadership qualities, and have used them depending on the situations they confronted.

“The true leader serves people. Serves their best interests, and in so doing will not always be popular, may not always impress. But because true leaders are motivated by loving concern rather than a desire for personal glory, they are willing to pay the price.”

Eugene B. Habecker