

WHAT WE MAY BE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEIVED LIMITS OF LEADERSHIP

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“A leader is anyone who seeks to implement change in the world around them.”

Most people are never comfortable labeling themselves as a leader. We often believe the title of leader belongs to people like George Washington or Nelson Mandela, not to the average person. What many fail to see is that they themselves actually possess the same ability to lead as the magnanimous people of history. Like great figures in history, every person has had to make hard decisions or solve problems. This is a leader, though most people do not recognize it. The idea of leadership has been warped so that people believe only certain personality types or academics are qualified to be leaders. In reality, the ability to be a leader is found in every person regardless of whether or not a person believes they deserve their title. Anyone who utilizes life-lessons, lives by a code of values, seeks to help those in need, or aspires to implement change in any capacity, is a leader.

Everyone will be called upon to lead at some point in his or her life. Leadership roles can be found in anything from being a parent, a student, or any circumstance that requires working with others. Drew Dudley, a leadership educator, argues that,

[People] have made leadership into something bigger than us; something beyond us [...] We've taken this title of "leader" and treat it as something that one day we're going to deserve. But to give it to ourselves right now means a level of arrogance or cockiness that we're not comfortable with. (00:00:33-00:00:44)

Leadership doesn't just belong to the politicians, CEOs, or presidents of the world. The word "lead" means to go before, or with, to show the way. Isn't that what parents do? They have lived lives before their children, had successes and failures, and now they teach their children the lessons they've learned. According to Prof. Dr. Muhamad Ahmed Qadri, a political science professor, leaders "should be honest"; be governed by "certain morals ... [and] ethics"; and must be problem solvers so they are able to find solutions and are able to "[create] a distinction between what is right and what is wrong" (22). Any parent will say they hope their children will achieve these principles in some way. What parents are really saying is that the very fundamental qualities of what makes a good person are the same qualities that define a leader. The development of leaders is "more dynamic than linear" (Hanson 109). Rather than a checklist of characteristics of leadership that are "acquired by a few," leadership is a "collection of abilities" (Gaiter 325). A leader isn't someone who possesses superhuman strength or psychic abilities. A leader is anyone who seeks to "ascertain and challenge their fundamental values and beliefs" and motivates others to become more than what they are (Hanson 111).

The question then becomes why don't people lead? The overarching answer is simple: fear. The fear of speaking up; the fear of going against the popular opinion; the fear of failing; the fear of leading people down the wrong path; the fear of more responsibility; the fear of taking initiative; the fear of succeeding. It is fear that motivates the justification of why people shouldn't lead. Justifications include but are not limited to concerns such as, "Who would listen to me? For I am not eloquent... but am slow of speech, and of tongue" (Exod. 4:10, Authorized King James Version); "I'm no one special or of significance to the world so why would I lead?"; "I'm not the personality type to lead so I shouldn't lead," etc. These concerns are excuses, not reasons, and therefore are of no merit. It does take courage to lead the fight, not knowing if what you are doing is necessarily right. However, a little-known secret is that the most terrifying part of becoming a leader is taking that first leap of faith. Once the initial jump is made, the next jump is easier, and so is each one that follows.

It is important to remember there is a learning curve when it comes to being a leader. Though people possess leadership qualities by nature, effort is required to develop these qualities. Being a leader means to take on much more responsibility by investing more time and energy into every project. It has been said, "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work" (Edison, n.d.). To assume a role of leadership is to assume a mantle of active responsibility. By taking on responsibility, leaders are held to different standards and expectations that

require much more work and effort than many are willing to put forth. Leaders are accountable for every action that will lead to either success or failure. “Being a leader involves taking risk[s], [being able to manage] in a crisis, being adaptable to change, and [possessing the ability to make] decisions that may not be popular or liked” (Gaiter 327). To be a leader is to make hard decisions and know when unpopular sacrifices or compromises must be made. It takes “courage and passion to lead” (Trybus 34), but with that comes an opportunity to reinvent one’s self and wield an innate power. This opportunity enables “the development of a new kind of leader who understands that change is complex and brings about uncertainty—but is the cornerstone of growth and improvement” (36). Leading change is not easy, but it is possible. It is also an opportunity to challenge preconceived notions and limits and rise above them.

Truly effective leaders are those who can inspire others to reject their current state of being and accept nothing less than the greatest version of themselves. Inspiring action is the measurement for what distinguishes a leader from a follower. Leaders are considered great, not because they have the most followers, but because they are able to inspire change through word and action. Simon Sinek, an author and motivational speaker, asserts that the real reason people came to listen to Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have a Dream* speech wasn’t necessarily to hear his plan for implementing civil rights, rather, “they showed up for themselves. It’s what they believed about America that got them to travel [to Washington D.C]” (00:16:23-00:16:30). They did believe in Martin Luther King, however, their belief in him was minute compared to their belief in themselves. If a person can inspire action, in any capacity, whether great or small, they are a leader. Leadership is an occasion meant “to inspire people to greater accomplishments” (Qadri 22) and help others realize the greatness found within themselves. Leaders emulate the ideals they wish to push forth in the world, and with that comes higher standards and higher expectations of those around them. Choosing to reject one’s personal views of one’s self and becoming something better makes a person a leader. Great oration and stoicism of leaders are important, but these pale in comparison to those who continually live a life that is forever changed because of someone else’s example.

Inside every person is the power and ability to lead, change the course of the world, and become something they never imagined possible (Trybus 34). Sadly, people often refuse to see their potential. Rather, they choose to see themselves as nothing more than the labels with which they associate. Their accepted limitations dictate how they will live their lives. Because of that, many don’t believe they deserve the title of leader (Dudley 00:00:35-00:00:38). While it is the leaders who are “ambitious and not afraid to stand up” (Qadri 22) that make a difference, few realize that those who are afraid of

leadership roles can also make a difference. A study on educational leadership conducted by Dr. Kaye B. Dotson and Dr. Syntia D. Santos found that when opportunities to lead are offered, only then will an individual gain the necessary skills to become an effective leader (56-57). While that seems like an obvious conclusion, it raises the question of why it needs to be explicitly stated or proved in the first place. The answer is because so few are willing to say with confidence that they are leaders. The majority will sit back and wait for an opportunity to lead with which they are comfortable. The lack of such opportunities equates to a lack of people seeking to stretch themselves. Again, what most don't realize is that those who decide to lead are really only a few steps ahead of everyone else. They aren't necessarily more qualified or smarter or better than those around them. Instead, they had the courage and confidence in themselves to try to lead.

Just as no one person is perfect, no leader is either. It is illogical then to shy away from opportunities of leadership because one views himself or herself as unable to live up to the associated expectations. Some failure is inevitable, but so is some level of success. What's important to understand is, regardless of success or failure, some kind of change is generated, and that's the measure of a leader: a person who inspires change. Only the leader who continually strives for excellence will inspire others to create change, not only in the things around them, but in themselves. A leader is any person who understands their own limitations and always seeks to improve themselves, their situation, or those around them. There will always be something that requires a person to stretch beyond their capabilities to solve problems and make hard choices. These times of hardship or challenge are opportunities, not obstacles, to use the foundations within a person that they have unknowingly built their entire lives. Utilizing life-lessons and following a distinct set of morals is not only what helps a person navigate through life, but is also what constitutes a leader. No matter how hard a person will try to avoid leadership roles through eloquent excuses founded on unwarranted fears or perceived limitations, they are still a leader whether or not they believe they are. Whether a person accepts or rejects the call to lead, their decision sets an example for others to look to, which is what a leader does.

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