

The Seven Insights of a Great Leader

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There are lots of articles and books about leaders and leadership. No wonder: leaders are esteemed by all for their ability to safely guide us to places we want to go, even if we don't know it until we get there.

Interest in leadership is nothing new. It has been studied since, at least, the days of Plato (google "philosopher king" if you're curious or accept the definition: an ideal ruler who is trained to be guided by the best interests of self and others).

One reason leadership is an ageless topic of interest is that we want to understand what separates leaders from followers, as well as how leaders emerge and develop into the people we admire. We are curious about these people who influence us and the world we live in.

This is more than idle curiosity. There is an inexhaustible need for leaders and leadership everywhere, and at all levels. There is an opportunity to lead wherever there are more than two people. This means there are plenty of opportunities for leaders to separate themselves from followers and try their hand at leadership.

In trying to add to the literature on leadership, I have taken a slightly different view. First, the focus here is on sustainable leadership. This is the type of leadership that people want to embrace over the long haul—not for a brief stint or in spite of how they feel about the leader. This is not one-and-done or crisis leadership.

Second, I've framed the description of leadership by referring to seven insights.

An insight is a deep understanding of something. In this case, it's an understanding of each of the necessary ingredients for leading others over time and how the ingredients coalesce into a platform for great leadership.

The seven insights are: knowing how to quiet doubt and worry; knowing how to care for the interests of self; knowing how to care for the interests of others; knowing how to navigate competing interests; knowing how to benefit from feedback from a partner or team; knowing how to hold self and others accountable; and having the courage to imagine and act on a vision.

Let me be clear. Leadership (even great leadership in the eyes of some) does not require all of the seven insights mentioned. As Derek Stern, PhD, partner in the Executive Assess Group, has pointed out to me, there are many successful leaders who have only a few of the characteristics outlined here. Indeed, a vision of where to go when leading and some informal (personal charisma) or formal authority (rank or position) are all that is required to lead.

Think of the difference between a malevolent dictator and a philosopher king, however. Both may lead effectively in one sense, but who would you rather follow over the long-term?

Closer to home, think of the difference between a parent who acts like a dictator or one who strives to be caring and benevolent. What type of parent would you choose to grow up with or aspire to be?

In other words, there is a continuum of leadership from tyrant to philosopher king (wise and reasonable) or however else you may want to characterize the endpoints. The question is, where do you want to be on the spectrum?

Assuming you would rather style yourself after a philosopher king, the starting point to becoming a great leader is learning how to quiet doubt and worry.

Everyone has to contend with doubt and worry. Everyone. If you don't think you do, google "denial."

Leaders have to be better than most at quieting these demons, because they must face uncertainty head on. Truly, at one level, leadership is chiefly about acting in spite of uncertainty. A leader who does not have an effective strategy for handling doubt and worry will be paralyzed by uncertainty to the point of inaction.

There are two primary strategies for quieting doubt and worry. The first strategy is to be "right" about what steps to take and when to take them. This is the "competence" strategy and we value leaders who seem competent by virtue of their education, experience, or combination of both.

There is comfort in thinking we're doing the right thing or taking the steps we need to—both for the leader and the followers. This is in spite of the "right" thing always being in the eye of the beholder...and a moving target, besides.

The second strategy for quieting doubt and worry is developing faith. I hasten to add that I'm not using the word faith in a religious sense. It could be in a religious sense, it's just not limited to the religious meaning of faith. If you have sincere faith that what you're doing is going to work out for the best, you effectively banish doubt and worry.

In my experience, combining competence and faith is the most powerful antidote to doubt and worry. If you can do a reasonable job of doing the right thing (for example, striving to implement best practices) and you can develop faith that any outcome will be instructive if not desirable, then you have built a strong defense against doubt and worry.

Please note: there are lots of other strategies for quieting doubt and worry. For example, there is the strategy of doing something because it's approved of by others or because it's disapproved of by others ("I'm going to do this because you said not to.") There's also the strategy of numbing yourself to doubt and worry through chemicals (alcohol and drugs) or obsessive working/playing/eating/exercising (there is little time for doubt and worry when you're always busy).

As you might guess, these other strategies for quieting doubt and worry are often ineffective and sometimes are destructive. Better to expend effort trying to do something right and having some faith—to attain the first insight.

In the next installment, I'll address the other insights that contribute to great leadership.