The Authentic Leader: Rejecting a Graven Image of Self

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Abstract

Exodus 1:4 states, “You shall not make for yourself an idol.”

There is a temptation for leaders to encourage (and/or allow) follower commitment to the purpose of organizations to morph into an unhealthy commitment to the leader. This is commonly referred to as a cult of personality. Such leader idolization is unhealthy for the leader, followers, and the organization itself regardless of whether the leader or followers are seeking to adhere to commands of scripture.

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Leaders often attract followers who are committed to achieving desired outcomes of an organization and therefore willing to invest themselves into the purpose. As accomplishing these outcomes is pursued, there is a temptation for the leader to expand such follower commitment to the purpose in a way that creates an unhealthy commitment to the leader. This is commonly referred to as a cult of personality. Such idolization occurs when the demarcation between the leader as a person and what the leader is attempting to achieve is blurred. This blurring and gradual morphing of intertwined purpose and personality is unhealthy for the organization, and for those leaders and followers seeking to adhere to the Ten Commandments of Christian scripture.

As the blending of the purpose and the leader’s personality becomes one, the adored leader is pulled by personal ego and pushed by followers in a manner where the leader begins focusing on personal brand management while concurrently leading the organization. In such cases, the leader begins representing the brand of the desired outcome. This cult of personality eventually produces a leader that is a brand of him or herself, and is not authentic. In contrast, the leader that soberly acknowledges his or her personal shortcomings while also seeking to achieve desired outcomes is an authentic leader.

While both authentic and unauthentic leaders seek to achieve desired outcomes, this paper distinguishes between self-serving unauthentic leadership vs. others-centric authentic leadership. It is intended to provide a warning to leaders and followers of creating an idol of the leader, and provides an example of an authentic leader who refused to allow the idolization of himself while he led others to a desired outcome.

The temptation for a leader to draw followers unto him or herself is fueled by three variables: 1) The followers that are attracted to the personal attributes of the leader, 2) the leader’s need for external
validation, and 3) the leader’s rationalization that encouraging follower adoration is often expedite to accomplishing desired outcomes in the short-term.

While it may be tempting for a leader to develop a cult of personality, such follower adoration eventually results in stress on the leader as he or she seeks to manage his or her personal brand while simultaneously striving to achieve desired organizational outcomes. It also eventually results in disappointment for followers as their insatiable and fickle expectations of perfection of their leader are not sustained. Therefore, effective long-term leadership requires the leader be authentic, which requires the leader to reject attempts of creating a graven image of him or herself.

To avoid being drawn into a cult of personality, leaders should do the following: 1) Have a clear understanding that one’s purpose is to work with others in achieving desired outcomes, and the organization’s accomplishments transcends the position and personal goals. 2) Privately and humbly acknowledge personal deficiencies. 3) Seek to achieve personal self-transitional leadership in developing meaningful improvements in these deficiencies. 4) Create internal and external controls to reduce the temptation of creating a graven image of oneself. Internal controls are those activities that encourage personal development coupled with humility, and external controls are those provided by peers asked to provide honest accountability. 5) Redirect follower adoration to achieving desired organizational outcomes.

A historical example of an authentic leader is Patrick Henry, an American Revolutionary War hero who modeled these four steps, and thereby rejected the unauthentic allure of creating a cult of personality. Patrick Henry was born in Virginia and unsuccessFully tried his hand at various businesses. He married Sarah Shelton whom had a modest estate, and Henry was considered in today’s parlance, an upper middle class Virginian. He eventually discovered an aptitude for law. However, Patrick Henry also discovered that he possess something few others had; a great ability to persuade others by using words. His oratory skills were remarkable, and his zeal for gaining either representation for the American
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colonies in the British crown or independence was legendary. As an attorney, people would attend court simply to hear him speak, and at age 29 was elected to the Virginia colony’s legislature. As a member of the House of Burgess in Williamsburg, Virginia this newly elected Representative quickly rose to prominence as his oratory skills effectively framed arguments advocating independence.

Understanding the historical framework is important since Henry lived in a time when image was tied to effectiveness, as evidenced by elaborate dress, powdered wigs, ball dresses, etc…. which mirrored images of influence in England. In colonial America, one’s social standing was paramount to effective leadership. In the midst of political branding that was common at the time, Patrick Henry effectively distinguished between creating a self-centered graven image of personality vs. allowing one’s personal reputation and “brand” to be outcomes-centered. His humility and desire to overcome personal deficiencies were evidenced by his personal discipline. Henry believed in a cause greater than his personal self-interest, and surrounded himself with a variety of wise influences. Law partners and those that worked in the community around his farm had equal influence as peers as revered leaders of the time such as Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. Equally important, Henry believed in the purpose of liberty for Americans. He had a sense of personal purpose that transcended his position as leader.

As Patrick Henry’s political rise was escalating rapidly, he faced personal crises at home. His wife Sarah, who had mothered their six children, became increasingly mentally ill. Cote (2005) writes, Sara “started to manifest disturbing behaviors which could not at the time be diagnosed or treated. Her mental condition deteriorated rapidly, and when she became dangerous to herself and others, she was clothed in a ‘Quaker shirt,” an early form of strait jacket.” (p. 47). Following the advice of friends and their family physician, Henry considered moving her to the public hospital in Williamsburg. However, upon inspecting the facilities Henry saw a dark and damp brick cell that contained a mat, chamber pot, and chain attached to the wall with a leg iron at the other end.
Henry rejected these accommodations for his wife. It should be remembered that this personal crises was occurring as his political star was rising, and within a culture that tied one’s physical, family, and professional success to political effectiveness. Namely, Henry had much to loose with Sarah’s condition impacting his political and professional career. Despite this, Patrick Henry converted the basement of their home into a safe area having pleasant views of the garden for Sarah. When Henry as at home he would “watch over her, fed her, bathed her, clothed her, and prevented her from harming herself.” When Henry was away in Williamsburg, he had a trusted female servant who was strong and kind assist Sarah. (Cote, 2005, p. 48).

In the spring of 1775, at the height of Henry’s political activities, Sarah died of natural causes. She was denied an Anglican Church Christian funeral since the church equated mental illness to represent a debilitating spiritual condition. Patrick Henry, “bowed down and bleeding under the heaviest sorrows and personal distresses” buried Sarah thirty feet from the home they shared. (p. 48).

In the midst of providing leadership to the American Independence, within a culture that celebrated upward social mobility that was also tied to one’s perceived spiritual condition, and in the midst of tremendous personal and professional risk to those advocating revolution – Patrick Henry did not create a cult of personality. He did not manage is wife’s condition in a manner that made him appear acceptable in an image that would have been desired by his followers. In contrast, he stood by the wife to whom he had made a commitment, honored her during a debilitating mental condition, protected her from physical and psychological harm, and honored her in life and death; all while providing leadership to other Americans. As history records, Henry’s selfless acts of leadership during this period of political transformation in America was paramount to its success. He did not dilute the purpose of liberty by allowing himself to merge within the message, nor did he allow leader-adoration of himself which would have distracted others from supporting the purpose of liberty.
Effective leaders can often fall into the temptation of managing their personal brand. Thus, creating an image of themselves that results in a form of worship by followers. This cult of personality, wherein a leader seeks to create followers of him or herself instead of aligning those followers into a collective that is focused on achieving desired outcomes is more than simple pride. As followers merge the vision of the leader with the leader him or herself, it is simply easy for the leader to allow such blurring of the demarcation between leader and vision to occur. However, as Christian leaders we are to point all mankind to the Lordship of Jesus, and not seek to attract mankind to ourselves. A graven image of oneself that draws people to a leader will result in brand management by the leader that is not authentic. As observant of the commandment not to create a graven image, Christian leaders must remain vigilant against the allure of allowing ourselves to become idolized.

From a long-term outcomes perspective, having such graven images of leaders is detrimental to the organization. In analyzing companies that have outperformed their industry indexes by at least ten times (referred by the authors as “10X companies”) during a recent ten-year period, Collins and Hansen (2011) emphasizes that these organizations have leaders that redirect follower adoration to the causes of the organization, which results in better outcomes for the organization. On the topic of the role of effective leaders in this organizations Collins writes, “it is ultimately about channeling your ambition into something that's not about you, your own ego, or what you get out of things,” Collins says. "It is about channeling your ambition into the cause, company, or association and whatever will ultimately make it successful. All of our 10X leaders have that." (p. 31)

Scripture emphatically states, “Create no graven image” or in another popular translation “You shall not make for yourself an idol”. Adoration of a leader, whether intentional or unintentional by the leader, or simply as the result of follower zeal to the purpose and personality of the leader should be guarded against. Guarding against this tendency is an important aspect of successful leadership. If allowed to grow, this unhealthy blurring of follower commitment to purpose and personality may results in a cult of personality of the leader. This graven image is in direct contrast to the commands of Christian
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scripture and also ultimately detrimental to the leader, follower, and long-term success of the organization.
References
