

Character: A Critical Component of Good Leadership

Leadership Advance Online– Issue XX

by Zina-Dawn N. Woolridge

“Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.”

- Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784),
English author, critic & lexicographer

The demise of leadership integrity in the business, political and religious arenas has contributed to what could be considered a global disdain for leaders and leadership in general (Vogt, 2009). Charlton (2008) points out, “...no generation of business leaders have (sic) received so much education, training and development, yet been found so wanting in areas that learning and development would find it hard to reach.” By this, he references moral and ethical characteristics that leaders are expected to possess.

Researchers and practitioners alike agree that these qualities are important for successful leadership. Griffin states, “Character separates good from great leaders; and it’s what differentiates and defines you” (2009, p. 14). Lantos defines character as “a person’s inner constitution that causes that person to be able to distinguish between right and wrong and then have the will to choose the right thing despite the possibility of personal sacrifice” (1999, p. 225).

Research reveals that the quality of leadership significantly impacts the conduct, habits and productivity of employees. Covey (2009) states companies which trust their leadership outperform companies that don’t by 300%. This demonstrates the importance of character in leadership; it impacts both individual and organizational success. Therefore, if a leader is to excel in business, developing character is a process that he or she cannot afford to minimize or ignore.

Positional Authority vs. Personal Authority

Positional Authority

Positional authority is defined as the power an individual holds as a result of his or her title or role in an organization; it is solely based on rank, which carries a certain level of status within the organization (Northcutt, 2007). In the past, one had to have a position or title to be considered a leader, a trend that has not been fully eliminated as in some organizations. Upper management's practice is to give greater consideration to the views and proposals of those who have the positional power to carry out their recommendations (Northcutt, 2007). Positional authority is based on historical constructs (Northcutt, 2007) and is therefore, rooted in the past. Its present purpose is situational (Northcutt, 2007).

Strengths of Positional Authority

- Leader gives directions and has access to resources to carry them out (Northcutt, 2007)
- Useful in teaching inexperienced workers (Harvey & Evans, 1995)
- Work of the organization gets accomplished as leaders can motivate activities with which they are familiar (Harvey & Evans, 1995)

Generally, positional authority hinders the development of relationships between leaders and followers (Armstrong, 2005; Northcutt, 2007; Tutwiler, 2005).

Weaknesses of Positional Authority

- Ignores the importance of followers in the leadership process (Warner, 2007)
- Leader's focus is on meeting the needs of his or her supervisor and the organization (Armstrong, 2005)
- Authority is weak in cases where followers believe the leader's official position was gained under questionable circumstances (Warner, 2007)
- Limited applicability; does not work in team-oriented environments (Northcutt, 2007)
- Primarily top-down communication (Northcutt, 2007)
- Leader can override views and wishes of followers (Tutwiler, 2005)
- Maintained distance between leader and follower to facilitate objectivity (Armstrong, 2005)
- Leaders can discipline followers (Armstrong, 2005)
- Followers have a tendency to obey leaders' incorrect decisions without challenging them which could negatively impact the organization's growth and performance (Northcutt, 2007)

Personal Authority

Northcutt (2007) defines personal authority as “the art of getting other people to do what you want them to do.” It is power granted on an individual because of the personal characteristics the individual possesses, such as integrity, interpersonal skills and expert knowledge (Tutwiler, 2005). It represents moral leadership in which the leader develops him or herself first, then develops the followers (Warner, 2007). Personal authority lends itself to greater success in business practice and organizational development.

Strengths of Personal Authority

- Rank or position in the organization not a prerequisite for leadership (Washbush, 1998)
- Leadership can be learned as it is practiced across the organization, thus increasing the potential management pool (Washbush, 1998)
- Strong, positive leader-follower relationship based on mutual trust and respect (Covey, 2009)
- Leader deems followers’ needs important (Washbush, 1998)
- Leader promotes followers’ growth through training, delegation of responsibility and providing resources (Washbush, 1998)
- Communication is two-way (Washbush, 1998)
- Emphasis on process designed to promote learning and self awareness in followers (Washbush, 1998)

Weaknesses of Personal Authority

- Individual’s authority may not be recognized by upper management (Northcutt, 2007)
- Could promote the concept of the “natural born leader,” which may inhibit others from trying to develop their leadership skills (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006)
- Relies on the integrity of followers, which may not exist in all persons (Estes, 2009)
- Talking to, supporting and encouraging followers is more important than inspiring them (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006)

Warner (2007, p. 8) cites Weber who observed that the various types of authority hardly ever exist in “pure form” and that they often overlap as leaders use the form of authority best suited to the situation at hand.

The Case for Character in Leadership

The Business Case

A leader's first job is to inspire trust (Covey, 2009). Covey acknowledges the decline of trust in our personal and organizational relationships, and attributes this decline, in part, to the erosion of leadership integrity (2009). He defines trust as "confidence born of character and competence" where character includes the leaders' "integrity, motive and intent"; and competence comprises the leaders' "capabilities, skills, results and track record" (2009, p. 15).

The book, "In Search of Excellence," argues that the measure of organizational excellence is not solely economic, but must include a moral measure (Lantos, 1999). This requires individual morality on the part of business leaders as they carry out their professional duties. No longer does the "business is war" mindset predominate in successful organizations (Lantos, 1999). Lantos declares, "Good ethics is good business" (1999, p. 224).

For an organization to be successful, the leadership must be committed to doing the right thing for the right reasons. Lantos differentiates between knowing good and committing to do good. He explains, despite knowing ethical standards, people usually experience "emotional hijackings" in times of crisis and resort to unethical behavior (1999, p. 223). Vogt presents the analogy of the organization as a mirror reflecting the character of its leadership by stating, "The overall integrity of a place of business is a direct reflection of the people who work there. Leaders set the moral tone of the organization" (2009, p. 1).

Charlton (2008) asserts that encouraging people to follow requires more than pointing individuals toward an organization's bottom line; followers require trust in their leaders. Covey describes trust as "confidence, born of character and competence" (2009, p. 15). Together these set the tone for business success.

Bell (2002) and Covey (2009) identify personal credibility as the basis for trust. Kouzes and Posner (1990) revealed that the most important criteria for followers is to have leaders who are credible. Covey (2009) adds that an individual's reputation is a representation of his or her credibility that precedes the individual in business dealings. Bell (2002) explains that we place our trust in another when we believe that the person possesses the fortitude to do as promised or as required. So, trust depends as much on character and integrity as it does on skill and knowledge.

A number of researchers have determined the personal characteristics and qualities found in great leaders. Kouzes and Posner (1990) found that honesty is the primary leadership characteristic followers regarded as critical, and they measured it according to whether leaders did what they promised and whether their actions were aligned with their stated beliefs.

Humility is another critical quality (Estes, 2009). Winston (2002) elaborates that humility renders leaders open to follower's advice, teachable, respectful to all and submissive to the organizational mission. Estes (2009) suggests the humble leader gives others credit when things go well and takes the blame when they don't. In other words, humble leaders delegate authority but don't "pass the buck" and blame their followers when problems arise. Bell (2002) outlines the importance of this to an organization as people are more likely to take risks and exercise creativity in an environment that is fair and accepts failure as an opportunity to learn.

Another quality of good leaders is authenticity, defined as "owning one's personal experiences... and acting in accordance with one's true self" (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005, p. 344). Kernis describes authenticity as the "free and natural expression of core feelings, motives and inclinations" (Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005, p. 380). According to the Newport Institute for Authentic Living, authentic leadership impacts others through the strength of an authentic presence (Strategic Direction 2008, p. 6). Authentic leaders' need to be true to oneself supersedes their need to be right (Strategic Direction, 2008). Additionally, they are confident, hopeful, resilient, moral and future oriented (Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005). Authentic leaders demonstrate positive behaviors that develop their followers into leaders themselves (Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005). Thus, the organization continues to flourish as people rise through the ranks to succeed others in leadership. This is important for success and succession planning in any organization.

Other characteristics of great leaders are honesty, openness, fairness and loyalty (Covey, 2009).

The Biblical Case

Romans 5:1-5 notes:

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, And endurance

produces character, and character produces hope, And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (NRSV)

This tells us that our character is important to God. In fact, it is so important that all members of the Trinity are involved in the character development process. It is something for which we must strive.

In 1 Timothy 3:2-7, the apostle Paul outlines the criteria to become a bishop as follows:

"Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way. For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil." (NRSV)

Note that with the exception of three: apt teacher, manage his own household well, and not be a new convert, these qualifications refer to character issues. In this scripture, Paul isn't advocating for perfection, rather for pure motives. This can be aligned with Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (NRSV), and Galatians 5:22-23, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things" (NRSV).

In these Scriptures, the Bible is clearly outlining the qualities preferred in leaders. These speak to matters of the heart more than to abilities or even spiritual gifts. Perhaps this is because skills can be taught and spiritual gifts are bestowed, but character must be consciously developed by the individual. I've heard several preachers state that God prioritizes in developing our character while we're here on earth because it is the only thing we will take to heaven with us. If we work to develop our character according to God's word, we will succeed as individuals and as leaders.

Relational Reward of Character

Leaders who operate with integrity and character will reap the reward in their relationships with their followers. According to Estes (2009), one benefit is in the quality of the followers. Organizations cannot retain people of integrity if the organization does not exercise integrity. Conversely, organizations and leaders that lack integrity cannot retain people of integrity.

Developing followers of integrity is another benefit. While the followers' personal identification with the leaders is the primary influence process early in the relationship, as the relationship progresses, the followers internalize the leaders' values (Yukl, 1999). Thus, the relationship becomes reciprocal.

Leaders who seek to learn from their followers will gain new knowledge and create equality and partnership in the leader-follower relationship with the ultimate benefit of mutual growth (Bell, 2002).

Similarly, sharing the responsibility for the work by delegating tasks and sharing information fosters confidence, understanding and commitment in followers. Followers are empowered as trust and respect between leader and followers grows (Pfeffer, 1998).

Grayson and Speckhart (2006) cite Chaleff who argues that the higher leaders progress in an organization, the more honest people are with them. By developing followers of integrity, leaders would ensure that their followers would provide honest feedback that would help the leaders continue to grow.

Grayson, Speckhart (2006) and Estes (2009) agree that one facet of great leadership is the ability to determine when to lead and when to follow. Collaboration is the consequence of this as followers "invest time and energy" into an organization that values their contributions (Axelrod & Axelrod, 2001, p. 300).

Finally, "organizational citizenship" is a feature of organizations led by people of integrity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman & Fetter, 1990). This is represented by followers willingly performing extra work outside of that which they are required to do. It is an indication of satisfaction with the organization.

Conclusion

The value of character in leadership cannot be overstated; it impacts the success of the leader, the followers and the organization itself. Great leadership is not merely based on position, but on the personal qualities of those in position.

Character is important from both a business and a spiritual perspective. The qualities of great leaders are articulated in both leadership texts and in the scripture. In both instances, who the person is, is critical in determining what they do.

While integrity in leadership is costly to the individual in the initial stages, perseverance brings about reward as the followers internalize the leader's values to the benefit of all. Eventually, the followers will contribute more than what is required as they reciprocate responsibility to the leader whom expresses a genuine interest in them.

In closing, to be a leader of integrity is to be concerned with what is best for persons within the organization, the organization itself and the context or community in which the organization functions. It requires a level of authenticity that cannot be feigned.

About the Author

Zina-Dawn N. Woolridge is a manager in the Department of Court Services in Bermuda and director of Next Step Counselling Service, a private counseling practice that specializes in counseling youth and their families. She is currently a doctoral student at Regent University in the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship.

Email: zinawoo@regent.edu

References

- Armstrong, R. (2005). "Requirements of a self-managed team leader." *Leader Values*. Retrieved August 8, 2009 from <http://www.leader-values.com/Content/detailPrint.asp?ContentDetailID=1004>
- Axelrod, D. & Axelrod, E. (2001). The engagement paradigm: Changing the way we change organizations. In P. Block & A. Markowitz (Eds.), *The flawless consulting fieldbook & companion: A guide to understanding your expertise* (300-305). San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Bell, C. R. (2002). *Managers as mentors: Building partnerships for learning* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

- Charlton, J. (2008). EDITOR'S COMMENT. *Training & Coaching Today*, 3. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Trade & Industry. (Document ID: 1613759831).
- Coogan, M. (Ed.). (2007). *The new Oxford annotated Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Covey, S. (2009, January). Building trust. *Leadership Excellence*, 26(1), 15. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 1629200341).
- Estes, A. (2009). "Leadership qualities: Characteristics of leadership." Retrieved July 31, 2009 from <http://www.leadershiparticles.net/Article/Leadership-Qualities--Characteristics-of-Leadership/12532>
- Gardner, W., Avolio, B., Luthans, F., May, D., Walumbwa, F. (2005). "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 343-372. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.003
- Grayson, D. & Speckhart, R. (2006). The leader-follower relationship: Practitioner observations. *Leadership Advance Online*, VI. Retrieved July 31, 2009 from http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/publications/journals/leadershipadvance/issue_6/pdf/grayson_speckhart.pdf
- Griffin, T. (2009, January). Great leaders. *Leadership Excellence*, 26(1), 14. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 1629200331).
- Harvey, M. & Evans, R. (1995). Strategic windows in the entrepreneurial process. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 10(5), 331-347. doi:10.1016/0883-9026(95)0003719
- Hay, A. & Hodgkinson, M. (2006). Rethinking leadership: A way forward for teaching leadership. *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 27(1/2), 144-158. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 1036342861).
- Ilies, R., Morgeson, F., & Nahrgang, J. (2005). Authentic leadership and eudaemonic well-being: Understanding leader-follower outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 373-394. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.03.002
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1990, July). The credibility factor: What followers expect from their leaders. *Business Credit*, 92(5), 24. Retrieved July 30, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 271072).
- Lantos, G. (1999). Motivating moral corporate behavior. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 16(3), 222-230. Retrieved July 17, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 115717105).
- Leadership and the meaning of life: Walking the talk responsibly - and authentically? (2008). *Strategic Direction*, 24(5), 6-9. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 1464052921).
- Northcutt, S. (2007). Positional and personal authority. Retrieved August 7, 2009 from <http://www.sans.edu/resources/leadershiplab/107.php>
- Pfeffer, J. (1998). *The human equation: Building profits by putting people first*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Podsakoff, P., MacKenzie, S., Moorman, R., Fetter, R. (1990). Transformational leader behaviors and their effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviours. *Leadership Quarterly*, 1(2), 107-142. doi:10.1016/1048-9843(90)90009-7

Tutwiler, S. (2005). *Teachers as collaborative parties: Working with diverse families and communities*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Vogt, M. (2009). "Leadership skills? Follow the leaders." Retrieved July 31, 2009, from <http://www.leadershiparticles.net/Article/Leadership-Skills-Follow-the-Leaders/14177>

Warner, N. (2007). Screening leadership through Shakespeare: Paradoxes of leader-follower relations in Henry V on film. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(1), 1-15. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.11.005

Washbush, J. (1998). Teaching leadership as a non-positional phenomenon. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 10(6/7), 337-339. Retrieved July 31, 2009, from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document ID: 115927044).

Winston, B. (2002). *Be a leader for God's sake*. Virginia Beach: Regent University School of Leadership Studies.

Yukl, G. (1999). An evaluation of conceptual weaknesses in transformational and charismatic leadership theories. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2), 285-305. doi:10.1016/S1048-9843999000013-2