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19.

LEADERSHIP AS WORK

Leadership is all the rage just now. “We’d want you to run a seminar for us on how one acquires charisma,” the human-resources VP of a big bank said to me on the telephone—in dead earnest.

Books, articles, and conferences on leadership and on the “qualities” of the leader abound. Every CEO, it seems, has to be made to look like a dashing Confederate cavalry general or a boardroom Elvis Presley.

Leadership does matter, of course. But, alas, it is something different from what is now touted under this label. It has little to do with “leadership qualities” and even less to do with “charisma.” It is mundane, unromantic, and boring. Its essence is performance.

In the first place, leadership is not by itself good or desirable. Leadership is a means. Leadership to what end is thus the crucial question.

History knows no more charismatic leaders than this century’s triad of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao—the misleaders who inflicted as much evil and suffering on humanity as have ever been recorded.

But effective leadership doesn’t depend on charisma. Dwight

Eisenhower, George Marshall, and Harry Truman were singularly effective leaders, yet none possessed any more charisma than a dead mackerel. Nor did Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor who rebuilt West Germany after World War II. No less charismatic personality could be imagined than Abe Lincoln of Illinois, the raw-boned, uncouth backwoodsman of 1860. And there was amazingly little charisma to the bitter, defeated, almost broken Churchill of the interwar years; what mattered was that he turned out in the end to have been right.

Indeed, charisma becomes the undoing of leaders. It makes them inflexible, convinced of their own infallibility, unable to change. This is what happened to Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, and it is a commonplace in the study of ancient history that only Alexander the Great's early death saved him from becoming an ineffectual failure.

Indeed, charisma does not by itself guarantee effectiveness as a leader. John F. Kennedy may have been the most charismatic person ever to occupy the White House. Yet few presidents got as little done.

Nor are there any such things as "leadership qualities" or a "leadership personality." Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, Bernard Montgomery, and Douglas MacArthur were all highly effective—and highly visible—leaders during World War II. No two of them shared any "personality traits" or any "qualities."

Work, Responsibility, and Trust Earned

What then is leadership if it is not charisma and not a set of personality traits? The first thing to say about it is that it is work—something stressed again and again by the most charismatic leaders: Julius Caesar, for instance, or General MacArthur and Field Marshal Montgomery, or, to use an example from business, Alfred Sloan, the man who built and led General Motors from 1920 to 1955.

The foundation of effective leadership is thinking through the organization's mission, defining it, and establishing it, clearly and visibly. The leader sets the goals, sets the priorities, and sets and maintains the standards. He makes compromises, of course; indeed, effective leaders are painfully aware that they are not in control of the universe. (Only misleaders—the Stalins, Hitlers, Maos—suffer from that delusion.) But before accepting a compromise, the effective leader has thought through what is right and desirable. The leader's first task is to be the trumpet that sounds a clear sound.

What distinguishes the leader from the misleader are his goals. Whether the compromise he makes with the constraints of reality—which may involve political, economic, financial, or interpersonal problems—are compatible with his mission and goals or lead away from them determines whether he is an effective leader. And whether he holds fast to a few basic standards (exemplifying them in his own conduct), or whether “standards” for him are what he can get away with, determines whether the leader has followers or only hypocritical time-servers.

The second requirement is that the leader see leadership as responsibility rather than as rank and privilege. Effective leaders are rarely “permissive.” But when things go wrong—and they always do—they do not blame others. If Winston Churchill is an example of leadership through clearly defining mission and goals, General George Marshall, America's chief of staff in World War II, is an example of leadership through responsibility. Harry Truman's folksy “The buck stops here” is still as good a definition as any.

But precisely because an effective leader knows that he, and no one else, is ultimately responsible, he is not afraid of strength in associates and subordinates. Misleaders are; they always go in for purges. But an effective leader wants strong associates; he encourages them, pushes them, indeed glories in them. Because he holds himself ultimately responsible for the mistakes of his associates and subordinates, he also sees the triumphs of his associates and subordinates as his triumphs, rather than as threats. A leader may be personally vain—as General MacArthur was to an almost pathological

degree. Or he may be personally humble—both Lincoln and Truman were so almost to the point of having inferiority complexes. But all three wanted able, independent, self-assured people around them; they encouraged their associates and subordinates, praising and promoting them. So did a very different person: Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower, when supreme commander in Europe.

An effective leader knows, of course, that there is a risk: able people tend to be ambitious. But he realizes that it is a much smaller risk than to be served by mediocrity. He also knows that the gravest indictment of a leader is for the organization to collapse as soon as he leaves or dies, as happened in Russia the moment Stalin died and as happens all too often in companies. An effective leader knows that the ultimate task of leadership is to create human energies and human vision.

The final requirement of effective leadership is to earn trust. Otherwise, there won't be any followers—and the only definition of a leader is someone who has followers. To trust a leader, it is not necessary to like him. Nor is it necessary to agree with him. Trust is the conviction that the leader means what he says. It is a belief in something very old-fashioned, called “integrity.” A leader's actions and a leader's professed beliefs must be congruent, or at least compatible. Effective leadership—and again this is very old wisdom—is not based on being clever; it is based primarily on being consistent.

After I had said these things on the telephone to the bank's human-resources VP, there was a long silence. Finally she said, “But that's no different at all from what we have known for years are the requirements for being an effective manager.”

Precisely.