

ON BECOMING A LEADER



Personal wake-up calls point to the kind of changes one must make on the somewhat mysterious quest to be a leader.

Becoming a leader involves a journey that can be a mystery even to those making it. You do a good job, make a solid contribution and win promotions. With continued success comes steady progress up the organizational chart and growing responsibility.

My own experience, which seems pretty common, was that each promotion came sans an instruction manual, textbook, or rules of engagement. While my superiors and I expected me to succeed, there was an unspoken assumption that I would have to make it on my own, using trial and error to learn the leadership behaviors that would work for me.

While many of us may have a textbook understanding of "leading" and "managing," the reality is that our organizations rely mostly on on-the-job training, expecting the newly promoted to figure out for themselves how to lead – perhaps with a dash of mentoring tossed in.

I found that every promotion came with at least six months of anxious discomfort. No matter how well I thought I could handle the new job, it always seemed to bring a fair share of unexpected surprises. No matter how much effort my boss had put into sponsoring me for the new role, once I had it in hand, I seemed to get little in the way of concrete instructions. He or she usually said something along the lines of "congratulations, well-deserved, good luck, and if you need any help just ask." But when you "don't even know what you don't know," those words of praise and well-meaning offers of assistance do little to stem your apprehension and uncertainty.

For better or worse, my approach to these transitions was to bluff my way through by reverting to behaviors that had worked for me before, actions that inevitably resulted in needless personal heartache and uncalled-for harshness in my dealings with other people. The personal distress came from my reliance on worry, a deeply ingrained thought habit that I was misguidedly using to motivate myself. I assumed that worry was a "good thing," a "friend" that helped me pay attention to details and adequately prepare for the future. What I did not see was that my worry habit not only made my own work much harder than it needed to be, but also often permeated those I was trying to lead.

Worry was so much on my mind that I actually worried about not worrying enough. As the people who reported to me "picked up" my fretful thinking, they began to find their own "good reasons" to worry, and their productivity dropped. Leaders' actions are often more important than what they say. It is funny to me now to recall the countless hours I wasted ruminating about outcomes that never happened or imagining the worst in the midst of success.

The harshness resulted from another thought habit, the pride I took in having the right answers. It was important to me not only for my ideas to be better than anyone else's but also for other people to acknowledge this superiority. I simply could not tolerate someone else's good idea. The better the idea, the more I fought against it, using every debating trick in the book. If that failed, I would use the power of my office to dismiss it.

Predictably enough, my people responded by not thinking for themselves. I was so blinded by pride and my own ego that the lack of initiative and creativity from demonstrably bright people genuinely puzzled me. With 20/20 hindsight, I'm amazed that my teams were able to achieve any success at all. And I cringe when I recall acting with such hubris. At the point when I was beginning to understand this flaw in my thinking, I had this image of myself on horseback leading the charge into battle, but with no one following me!

While I was muddling through, the only thing averting disaster was the forbearance of my direct reports, who in light of some level of goodwill and respect that they felt coming from me, would simply work around my righteousness by seeing what obviously had to be done and doing it.

I now realize that had I not changed, I would surely have met with frustration and failure. There was no way that I could have led more than a small team given my habitual modes of thinking, worry and arrogance. In point of fact, I had a hard time heeding the suggestions of my bosses, making adjustments based on the insights of others, or hiring people strong enough to challenge me. Not too smart!

Like many people who find themselves in leadership roles, I was muddling though, trying my best to achieve the desired results. Then I got a couple of wake-up calls that, fortunately, I answered. I had a falling out with one of the other founding partners of a consulting firm we had started -- and I adopted a child.

As a new parent, I could not help but see that my son was going to learn more from my example than from anything I could possibly tell him about life. What shocked me was how carefully he watched me (and others) and then imitated our actions. I had no idea that this is the primary way young children learn. But once I saw it in action, it became intuitively obvious. Consequently, I began to reflect on what he might be learning from my behavior. And I had an inkling that not all of my actions were worthy of his emulation, including my habit of worrying and ruminating way too much, at home as well as at work.

Gunn Partners was founded, in part, on the desire to create a firm that supports its consultants, as opposed to the typical large firm where it's all about the consultants supporting the firm. Yet, after just six months, one of the founding partners and I split over values of teamwork, collaboration, and participatory decision-making. From my perspective, this partner seemed to be acting in complete opposition to what those words meant to me and to what I had thought they meant to him. It was clear that one of us had to go.

In the back of my mind I sensed that there was something I was failing to see. How could I have misread someone with whom I had worked closely for a number of years at our previous employer? I also felt that if I were a more capable leader, I would have found other ways to resolve the issues besides splitting the firm in two.

Nowadays when someone asks me about my quest to become a better leader (and father), I am overcome by a deep sense of gratitude for having made a personal commitment to discovering the answers in the face of "not knowing" where my quest might lead. At times the process of looking within for clarity felt extremely uncomfortable. I recall vivid feelings of having the skin sandblasted off my body. But the personal price seemed small compared with the positive impact I could have on my son, on the people I touched as a leader and, ultimately, on myself.

What other choice was there? How can you aspire to lead and not have the best interests of your charges at heart? How can you not desire to be the most accomplished parent you can be? Why would a search for glimpses of the deeper meaning of life not be a worthy pursuit?

In looking back on the journey, I am also most appreciative of several people, three in particular, who offered guidance, support, and certainty at important junctures. It was not that they necessarily knew the answers themselves, they were far more respectful of my journey than that, but rather that they had deep faith in my ability to discover those answers and find what I was looking for.

These columns are my attempt not only to repay them but also to honor my own commitment to staying on the leader's path with ever-deeper levels of understanding, consciousness, and humility. For it is in the process of reflecting on these questions and sharing the insights gained that I also learn.

The sages say, Sharp like the razor's edge is
The path to enlightenment

~ The Upanishads. Translated By Eknath Easwaran

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