



The Essence of Leadership

HBSWK Pub. Date: Sep 6, 2005

We know leadership when we see it. But just what are the key ingredients of powerful leaders? asks Jonathan Byrnes. Can we learn to be great?

by Jonathan Byrnes

What are the essential qualities of an effective leader? Can these be recognized in young people? Can they be developed?

These questions were the topic of a meeting I recently had with a top admissions officer of a leading graduate school of business. This official was reflecting on the profile of applicants to be accepted in the school. She wanted to be sure that this profile was the most appropriate one, and not take anything for granted.

Great leadership seems easy to recognize, and you usually can tell when someone is lacking in leadership qualities. But how do you define it? This is a critical question both for selecting and developing your subordinates, and for developing your own leadership capabilities.

Here's a definition of leadership that has stuck with me: Leaders are "people who leave their footprints in their areas of passion."

Not surprisingly, I heard this definition in a presentation given by the admissions officer and a colleague of hers. And, in fact, this admissions officer was showing leadership by inviting me and others in to talk about admissions profiles: She was taking an already excellent process, and rather than being complacent with it, she was making it even better. She was leaving her footprints in her area of passion.

Some companies have a culture of relentless, almost compulsive, improvement. No matter how good the company is, it should be doing better. It reminds me of a Smithsonian exhibit on American ingenuity, "If We're So Good, Why Aren't We Better?"

By contrast, other companies are smugly stuck in the past. I remember one vice president telling me that his company was doing everything right because "if there were a better way, we would have found it, and we'd be doing it."

The lesson: When you have the lead, step on the gas. After all, that's how you got there.

In recent columns, I explained the nature of paradigmatic change in "[The Challenges of Paradigmatic Change](#)," and described how to manage it in "[Manage Paradigmatic Change](#)." In this column, I discuss the nature of effective leadership, and outline how you can develop it in yourself and others.

Ambidextrous leadership

In a sense, great leaders have to be ambidextrous. On the one hand, they have to be able to execute capably within the current business paradigm, "the way we do business." On the other hand, they must be able to reflect on the current paradigm, find ways to fundamentally improve it, and manage the large-scale change to a successful conclusion. You need two hands, and a lot of commitment, to change the propeller on the airplane in mid-flight, but that capability is the essence of successful leadership.

Think of it this way: Someday your current job will be a line entry on your resume. Under the entry, you'll have two or three bullets to describe your major accomplishments. "Did a good job of doing what always was done" can't be one of them.

"Doing a good job of doing what always was done" is the ante; it's what you have to do to keep the job. The bullets, your major accomplishments, come on top. They are your successes at changing the current

paradigm, and this is how you showcase your leadership.

By the way, there is a lot of power in reflecting at the beginning of a new job on what you want the two or three bullets to be, and deliberately setting about building them over the course of your job tenure. Otherwise, you run the risk of having them simply be the incidental byproduct of what opportunities happened to come your way.

Can you be a good leader without being a good manager? In my experience, the best leaders are also great managers, and the best managers have strong leadership capabilities. To be successful, you must have both a passion for improving your organization and the capability to drive your efforts through to completion.

It certainly is possible to team someone who likes to change things with someone who prefers to manage stability. In fact, the most effective teams have one person who constantly pushes the limits and another who constantly ensures that the organization doesn't blow up. The former winds up going slower than he or she would like to, the latter winds up going faster than is comfortable, and the compromise is great for the company. However, both members of the team need to have the full capability to manage ambidextrously. Otherwise, they will not have the common understanding and mutual respect to agree on the compromises necessary to create an effective course of action.

Managing the day-to-day, which is the core requirement of any position, is no small task. It requires that you produce consistently good results, meet objectives, and constantly "tune up" the business processes that you're employing. Success involves competence, ability, and teamwork. You can and should derive a great deal of satisfaction from doing a good job at this, but don't mistake day-to-day management for leading paradigmatic change.

Leading paradigmatic change

Quantum change management is very different from day-to-day management. It involves conceptualizing and creating fundamental improvements that change the way business is done. For example, finding ways to improve customer service levels, like order fill rates, is a day-to-day accomplishment, while developing and implementing intercompany operating ties, like vendor-managed inventory, is a quantum change to the way that business is done.

In order to lead paradigmatic change, you need eight essential characteristics. These characteristics are over and above your day-to-day capabilities and the domain knowledge you need to analyze what to do.

- **Capacity for passion.** First and foremost, you need a burning drive to make things better. Change management is a grueling process, and passion will see you through it. Some managers just seem to have "fire in the belly."
- **Perspective.** In order to convert passion into action, you must be able to "step back" and "view" what you're doing even while you're doing it. This is what the admissions officer was doing when she was reflecting on whether the admissions profile was correct, even while she was busy with her day-to-day activities.
- **Creativity.** Once you have a perspective on your business process, it takes creativity to see fundamentally new and more effective ways to do things. Some people are more naturally creative than others, but you can get your creative juices flowing by surveying a variety of business practices in a variety of companies. In good measure, business school case studies offer this perspective. So do business magazines and other publications.
- **Organization skills.** Leading major change requires both soaring creativity and mundane practicality. You have to translate a broad vision into a very well organized, practical, step-by-step program. Otherwise, people won't have the confidence needed to let go of the old "tried and true" way of doing things.
- **Teamwork.** Virtually all major change involves engaging, persuading, and working with other people. You have to have the organization's best interests at heart, and really be motivated to make things better for those you seek to lead. With this attitude, and a good practical plan, people will be inclined to follow you.
- **Persistence.** After passion gets you started, persistence is what carries you through. I can think of several brilliant, creative, passionate managers who came up with great ideas but lost interest when it was time to slog through the implementation. Ultimately, they designed great plays but they never put the points on the scoreboard.
- **Open-mindedness.** Large-scale change necessarily involves a good measure of learning by doing. By definition, you're sailing into uncharted waters. A good leader needs a high level of tolerance for

ambiguity.

- **Integrity.** Last, but by no means least, leaders need integrity. This doesn't just mean not breaking the law. That's honesty, which certainly is an important component of integrity. But integrity goes beyond that. It is a matter of being genuine, being motivated by your deeply held values to make your organization and your coworkers better off. This is where the passion, persistence, and teamwork come from. Without integrity, you're simply promoting yourself, and people will not follow your lead.

Can leaders be developed?

Like anything else, leadership ability is distributed throughout a population. Some people are "natural" leaders, others prefer to operate capably within a well-defined context, and many people are somewhere in between.

Natural leaders have important core abilities, but they often need careful training in the more practical aspects of converting a creative vision into a concrete program of action. Very often, they need to understand the length of the change lifecycle so they don't underestimate the importance of persistence.

Most people, however, can develop their leadership skills by working at it. The process starts with the recognition that leadership requires "ambidextrous" activities. The first hurdle is recognizing that excellence at the day-to-day is critical, but it is not enough. The second is the need to look inside yourself and decide whether you are willing to be uncomfortable for a prolonged period while you conceptualize and lead the change. The ultimate reward is the deep satisfaction that comes from seeing something new that wouldn't have been there if you had not created it.


Once you decide to become a leader, you can develop the characteristics you'll need by being thoughtful about the accomplishments that you want on your resume, and deciding to devote the time and attention needed to achieve them. Like anything else, practice makes perfect.

To be a great leader, you need a certain level of intellect, but not necessarily great genius. You need a certain level of social skills, but not necessarily those of a great salesperson. However, you do need a compulsion to operate at two levels: to be a great doer, and a great reflector.

Most importantly, to be a great leader, you need to find what you really like. That's where the passion, commitment, and integrity come from. In my experience, the most important underlying factor in leadership is whether a person has searched out and found a great match between what's in his or her heart, which is what he or she really enjoys, and the work situation.

Think about the definition of leaders, "people who leave their footprints in their areas of passion." It's easy to focus on the first part, how to leave footprints. But the real power comes from the second, working in your area of passion.

How can you recognize leadership potential in a young person? The most important clue is whether the person has identified and sought out a work situation in which he or she feels real passion. If a person doesn't have the drive or ability to get his or her own situation right, how will he or she be able to do this for a company? If you're doing what you really like, you almost can't help but feel passion toward making it better.

See you next month. 

Copyright © 2005 Jonathan L. S. Byrnes.

Jonathan Byrnes is a Senior Lecturer at MIT and President of Jonathan Byrnes & Co., a focused consulting company. He earned a doctorate from Harvard Business School in 1980 and can be reached at jlbyrnes@mit.edu.