

Program Research Project

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

BY

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by

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Vision determines the direction of any organization. Character inspires confidence in the leader and in those he leads. Competency is the ability to say it and do it in such a way that others want to follow.

The challenge of effective leadership is to get the best out of one's subordinates. Vision, character, and competence are the three strategic leadership principles necessary to achieve the mission and shape the future of any organization.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

Leadership is like beauty, it's hard to define, but you know it when you see it.

— Warren Bennis

What is essential in a leader that will make others want to follow him? Why will people follow certain type of leaders and not others? What are the essential strategic leadership principles necessary to be a truly effective leader that others want to follow?

Army Regulation 600-100, Army Leadership, defines leadership as; “influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”¹ Whether in the world of business, sports, politics, religion or the military; vision, character, and competence are three essential strategic leadership principles an organization needs to succeed. In any organization, it is the strategic leader’s responsibility to put forward the vision, character, and competence necessary to influence others and accomplish the mission.

Leadership Defined

Leroy Eims, author of *Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be* writes, “A leader is one who sees more than others see, who sees farther than others see, and who sees before others do.”² Contrary to opinion, leaders are made; not born, and leadership is an ability that every person can develop. Leaders, and leadership ability, are made out of adversity, hard work, and self-learning. However, before a person can lead others they must learn how to lead themselves.

Leadership scholar Warren Bennis, author of *On Becoming A Leader* writes, “Leaders are made, not born and made more by ourselves than by external means.

...Something else they have in common is that each of these individuals has continued to grow and develop throughout life.”³ Bennis adds, true leaders are usually “self-made” individuals able to express themselves fully.⁴ True leaders know who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how to utilize their strengths while compensating for their weaknesses. They also know what they want, why they want it, and how to communicate to others what they want in order to win support and cooperation.

In his book *Wooden on Leadership*, John Wooden believes leadership is learned and most people possess a potential far beyond what they think is possible. Wooden comments, “Those who aspire to be leaders can do it; those who wish to become much better leaders can also do it.”⁵ Wooden learned leadership through listening, observation, study, as well as trial and error.⁶ Leadership simply does not happen, but can be learned and developed through hard work and commitment.

Learning to lead is a lot easier than most people think because within every person is the capacity for leadership. However few people are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to become a successful leader. In a leadership speech to his football team, Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi stated, “All of you possess leadership ability. But leadership rests not only on outstanding ability. It also rests on commitment, loyalty, and pride.”⁷

Leadership Qualities

Leadership consists of many fundamental qualities or traits, such as attitude; passion; love for people (which equates to care and concern); poise; balance; and

influence through mentoring; communicating, and motivating. These qualities are contagious and leaders who display them find their organization doing the same.

John Wooden believes a person can not separate who they are from their leadership traits. He said, "There is no more powerful leadership tool than your own personal example. A team ultimately becomes a reflection of their leader."⁸ Leaders cannot build a team, organization, or a company that is much different from themselves. A leader's attitude becomes the attitude of those he leads. Winston Churchill's courage and defiance during World War II strengthened an entire nation in the worst of times and his attitude became the attitude of those he led.

Successful leaders have a genuine love in their heart for the individuals they lead. Someone once commented, "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care."⁹ Care and concern bind an organization, for this to be effective it begins with the leader. Leadership expert John Maxwell, author of *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* summarizes it best when he wrote, "To lead yourself use your head, to lead others use your heart."¹⁰

Leadership is also influence. In his book *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* Hans Finzel notes, "Great leaders challenge people to attempt things they would never try on their own."¹¹ A competent leader has the qualities to take an organization to places it would never go by itself.

Passion, attitude, care and concern, and influence are but a few of the many qualities of effective leadership. Leadership is not simply one quality over another, but rather a mixture of many qualities under certain essential leadership principles. A

leader can compensate for leadership qualities in which they are deficient in, but they can not compensate for leadership principles they have not developed or learned.

Though no single individual can acquire all the qualities of leadership, there are three important leadership principles a leader needs in order to influence others to act. The three essential strategic leadership principles that a leader must acquire if they are to influence others to accomplish the mission and ensure organizational success are vision, character, and competence.

The First Leadership Principle - Vision

The first duty of any leader is to lead. Strategic leadership grows out of competence, character, and a comprehensive vision. When these building blocks are in place, a leader can lead. The first essential principle of effective strategic leadership is vision and unless a leader possesses the vision to know where the organization is going, and why, it can never possibly get there.

Army Field Manual 6-22, Army Leadership, states, "The strategic leader's vision provides the ultimate sense of purpose, direction, and motivation for everyone in the organization. ...A shared vision throughout the organization is important for attaining commitment to change."¹² The ability to provide vision, or see its value, is vital to the strategic leader. Others in the organization may, and often times do, provide vision. It is the leader, however, who must recognize its value and transform the vision into reality. Army Field Manual 6-22 further states, "... while direct and organizational leaders have a near-and mid-term focus, strategic leaders must concentrate on the future."¹³

Vision determines the future direction of any organization. What could be more important in the leadership process than to start with the vision? Vision is needed in order to tackle and accomplish the mission. As noted by John Maxwell, "Vision is everything for a leader. It is utterly indispensable. Why? Because vision leads the leader."¹⁴

The most effectual leaders are those who are able to think and see two or three steps ahead. They are able to see and understand the big picture. Henry Kissinger defined a leader as "An individual who created alchemy of vision that moved people from where they were to places that they have never been before."¹⁵ Strategic leaders are able to turn vision into reality. They have what Bennis calls "The Gretzky Factor." Hockey great Wayne Gretzky stood out because he knew it was not as important to know where the puck is now as to know where it will be in the future. Bennis summarizes it this way, "Leaders have that sense to know where the culture is going to be, and where the organization must be if it is to grow."¹⁶ To neglect the future is the biggest mistake a leader can make. A strategic leader without vision is failing at leadership.

There is an old saying, "unless you are the lead dog, the scenery never changes." For the strategic leader, the scenery is always changing. Everything is new and that is why the leader's vision becomes so essential. Leaders must have a vision of where they want to take the organization and that vision must be grounded in reality.

George Washington had a vision of a free nation. He kept that in the forefront of his mind, which enabled Washington to translate his vision into reality.¹⁷ Entrepreneurs are noted for their ability to paint a vision and influence others to work towards its

realization. One of President Theodore Roosevelt's top international priorities was the construction of the Panama Canal. Roosevelt had the vision and ability to rally others toward its actualization.¹⁸

Hans Finzel, an authority in the field of leadership, observed, "Leaders are paid to be dreamers. In fact, the higher you go in leadership, the more your work is about the future."¹⁹ George Bernard Shaw once said of himself, "I am a dreamer, some men see things as they are, and ask why; I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?"²⁰ The larger an organization is the more clearly the leader has to see ahead. Leaders envision the nature of the organization, and how that vision fits into the future and in a changing world of tomorrow.

John Maxwell says followers need leaders who are able to effectively "navigate" for them. He writes, "Leaders who navigate see the whole trip in their minds before they leave the dock. They have a vision for their destination, they understand what it will take to get there, they know who they'll need on the team to be successful, and they recognize the obstacles long before they appear on the horizon."²¹ To summarize Maxwell, leaders who are good "navigators" have the ability to take their people and their organization just about anywhere.

Success as a leader is the ability to direct the organization where it needs to go. For the leader, the responsibility and challenge is to transform the vision into reality. The defining moment of a leader is the realization of their capacity to create and realize the vision. Without a vision, people will not buy into the leader's vision, or the organization.

Vision describes the future the leader seeks to create. The leader provides the link so people can see it and can commit to it. Rudy Giuliani, author of *Leadership* writes, “Expressing ideology is one of the leader’s most powerful tools. He must bring people aboard, excite them about his vision, and earn their support.”²²

How a leader influences others dictates the direction and the strength of an organization. Leaders who possess great vision use persuasion to provide direction to any organization. An effective vision empowers people and prepares them for the future.

Warren Bennis makes this statement about leading, “I think the first thing one has to do is get people on one’s side and show them where you want to take the company. I think you trust in a man who has a vision and can make you see his vision is the right thing to do.”²³ Future leaders can also learn a lot from Abraham Lincoln’s example. One of the most effective ways he worked to garner acceptance of his ideologies, was to demonstrate it through his daily actions. Lincoln was always calculating, and planning ahead, and would frequently share of his vision for America with others.²⁴

Qualities of Vision

It is possible within an organization to create a culture that attracts people with the traits that a leader values. A leader does this through qualities fundamental to vision, such as creating organizational traditions or history, developing alertness or discernment and providing poise or balance throughout unforeseen situations.

Bo Schembechler, legendary coach of the Michigan Wolverines, once commented, “One of the common mistakes new leaders make – and I can’t for the life

of me understand this one – is to ignore the history of the organization they just took over, or even to disrespect it. That, to me, is the mark of a weak leader – and one who’s probably not going to last very long.”²⁵ The history or culture of an organization is one of its greatest strengths. Strong cultures contribute to organizational accomplishments by supporting the mission and the leader’s vision for the organization.

Underestimating the power of an organization’s history, culture, or tradition is short sighted. Leaders win with tradition. Bo Schembechler summoned “Wolverine Pride,” Vince Lombardi invoked “Packer Pride,” and Red Auerbach brought into play “Celtic Pride” all on their way to making each of these organizations quite successful. Tradition motivates people and helps direct their individual interests towards something larger than themselves – the organization.

Another fundamental quality to vision is alertness or discernment. Alertness is the ability to constantly observe, absorb, and learn from what is going on, while it is going on. It is a critical component of vision. Alertness is a common leadership trait for those lead organizations that consistently stay ahead of the competition. The leader who possesses alertness strives for continuous improvement and keeps focused on the vision.

Every leader and every organization will face unforeseen problems. Staying focused and remaining poised is also fundamental to vision. Poise is staying focused under fire and equates to having a brave heart in all circumstances. Leaders lacking poise often panic under pressure, which affects the vision and impedes accomplishing the mission.

When asked how he was able to stay calm in the face of the Sept. 11, 2001, crisis, Rudy Giuliani commented, “I thought about the people of London enduring relentless bombing and continuing to lead their lives. I thought about how people in present-day Israel do the same. It reaffirmed a strong feeling I had that Americans would rise to this challenge.”²⁶ While external events cannot be controlled, responses to them can be. Responses become important because they play a profound role in the life and in the effectiveness of the leaders.

The Second Leadership Principle – Character

Character is the second essential leadership principle that strategic leaders must employ successfully in order to influence others to accomplish the mission. Character, simply put, is the means of knowing the difference between right and wrong and having the courage to do what is right. Character inspires confidence in the leader and in those he leads. Every organization is a reflection of its leader and that is what makes character so essential.

President Eisenhower once stated, “I believe deeply that every occupant of the White House has one profound duty to the nation: to exert moral leadership.”²⁷ Leaders are effective because of who they are on the inside and who they become on the outside. Character is what a person does when no one is watching. A leader who is grounded in character does the right thing every time. When a person is grounded in character they are the same person in private as they are in public.

How a leader responds to life circumstances tells others a great deal about their character. Life’s circumstances do not always build character, but they certainly reveal one’s character. The process of building character begins within. Dean Smith,

legendary basketball coach of the University of North Carolina for 36 years, stated, “All great leaders know you can’t just talk about good character; you have to live it. To become an extraordinary leader, you must build your own personality skills.”²⁸ Effective leaders build themselves by developing healthy personality characteristics.

An organization will reflect the character of its top leader. John Wooden came to believe that if he as a coach and leader, conducted himself in such a manner to earn respect of those under his leadership, it would be such a powerful motivator to attract talent with the same characteristics.²⁹ Good character attracts good people, and a leader with good character attracts talent with the same. Proficient leaders focus on strengthening their own personality characteristics.

General (Retired) Norman Schwarzkopf points to the significance of character: “Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy.”³⁰ Billy Graham puts it another way, “When wealth is lost, nothing is lost. When health is lost, something is lost. When character is lost, everything is lost.”³¹ Being the leader means setting the example as people will follow a leader’s every move. True leadership begins with the inner person, which is why someone like Billy Graham is able to attract more and more people as time goes by. People over time can sense the depth of his character. Without character, leadership falls apart.

Qualities of Character

A significant characteristic of effective leaders is that they care about the people they lead. Basically they like people, they enjoy helping others succeed and they have a genuine care, love, and concern for the people of their organization. Exceptional

leaders have concern for others and a keen ability to find the best in people through truly caring for them. The best leaders in any organization are those who care about the people they lead, and those being led know when the caring is genuine. Dean Smith came to the conclusion that not caring about people is probably one of the “deal breakers” for successful leadership. He says, “If you don’t place people first in your sights, they probably don’t like working for you.”³²

The best leaders care about the people entrusted to them and want to see them succeed. People are much more likely to trust a leader if they know the leader is caring and compassionate. Character makes trust possible, and trust makes leadership possible. No leader can break the trust of their people and expect to continue influencing them effectively. Trust is what other people invest in the leader based on the leader’s character.

Another quality of character is the leader’s morals or values. There is perhaps, no more powerful leadership tool than the leader’s own example. A leader’s example demonstrates a great deal of what the leader truly values to their followers. Character counts and values matter. The leader sets the standard for both in the organization.

John Wooden emphasizes, “Your behavior as a leader – what you do – creates the environment in which the team functions.”³³ The leader sets the example in the organization, not only in the areas of right and wrong – character – but in all areas of qualities the organization seeks. Good values attract good people. Good people with good values create an organizational environment of honesty and trust.

One final quality fundamental to character is passion. A leader will never go about leading others effectively unless they put their whole heart into it. If it is just a job

to the leader, then it will be just a job to the people and the leader will be able to fool no one. Passion communicates to others a conviction, excitement, and inspiration. Dwight Eisenhower said that nothing motivates another person the way passion does, and no other thing can take the place of passion in a leader's life.³⁴

The Third Leadership Principle – Competence

A leader's ultimate responsibility – first to themselves, then to their people – is training and learning because every job requires it. The path to success lies in the realization that there is always more to learn. Strategic leaders understand that in order to successfully compete at any level requires continuous learning and improvement. The best leaders are lifelong learners who create organizations that promote and inspire learning throughout. John Wooden defined success on how close a person came to reaching their own particular level of competency.³⁵ Leadership grows in large part out of competence, and an individual's competence is gained through continuous learning.

George Washington was a wide-ranged reader and assembled an impressive library. He was a lifelong learner who studied beyond politics and academics and into various areas of culture. As a statesman, he made certain he was competent in the fields of interest that all the "right people" were passionate about.³⁶ Washington's competency brought him effectiveness when dealing with foreign leaders and foreign affairs.

Teddy Roosevelt made the comment, "Books are the greatest of companions," he told a friend, "Reading is a disease with me."³⁷ Other lifelong learners, in professions that might appear at odds, were Vince Lombardi and Bo Schembechler. Both of these men never stopped learning and had reputations for being voracious readers. Two

successful businessmen and 21st century entrepreneurs who continually read to further develop their competencies are Donald Trump and Earvin “Magic” Johnson. Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft Corporation, sets aside a half hour of each working day, and an additional two weeks per year, for reading intended to advance his education.

Leadership scholar Warren Bennis, in his lifelong study on leadership, found “that dedication to ongoing learning is a constant among top leaders.”³⁸ Lee Iacocca is also a voracious reader and when growing up, both he and his sister were strongly encouraged to read by their parents.³⁹

In his book *Where Have All The Leaders Gone*, Iacocca emphasizes that a leader has to also listen to some “No” people and not simply the “Yes” people in their inner circle. Iacocca said, otherwise the leader will go stale and not continue to grow.⁴⁰ Rather than surround himself with yes men, Lincoln associated with people who knew their business and whom he could learn something, whether they were his advocates or adversaries. Lincoln was naturally inquisitive, and possessed a capacity and desire to learn new things which led him to be unusually innovative.⁴¹

Successful leaders are learners and they differ from others in their constant desire for knowledge. It is this desire and capacity to develop and improve that distinguishes them from followers. A leader’s competency comes from a lifelong desire for learning and the best leaders never stop learning. They have a unique capacity to be taught by those whom they come into contact. Billy Graham said of himself, “Learning was an insatiable desire with me. I burned to learn.” Near the end of his public ministry, in his mid-eighties, he said, “I am still a man in process.”⁴² He also learned from his critics, but his ultimate learning came from listening to God.

A leader's added value seems to come not from what they have learned, but rather from their capacity to continue to learn. A recent research study in the Harvard Business Review on Developing Leaders suggests that one of the most reliable indicators and predictors of true leadership is the ability to learn, even from the most negative experiences.⁴³ A leader must continuously learn if they are to remain a competent leader. Rudy Giuliani noted, "If you read enough about something you will unravel its mystery and will ultimately understand the fundamentals in a deeper way than simple observation would provide. Then if you have an inquiring mind, you can apply yourself to that subject and have success in ways not experienced even by those who have spent much more time on it."⁴⁴

When a leader continues to learn they further develop their competence. When they further develop their competence they also develop trust, loyalty, and confidence from their followers. John Maxwell says, "Competence goes beyond words. It's the leader's ability to say it, plan it, and do it in such a way that others know that you know how – and know that they want to follow you."⁴⁵ Competent leaders also develop competency in other leaders. This requires a significant investment of time and resources by the leader. It is much easier to tell people what to do than it is to teach and train them how to do it.

The key for leaders is to help individuals understand their strengths and weaknesses, and to maximize the former while minimizing or neutralizing the latter. John Wooden states, "... personal greatness for any leader is measured by the effectiveness in bringing out the greatness of those you lead." He adds, "Each member

of your team has a potential for personal greatness; the leader's job is to help them achieve it."⁴⁶

Qualities of Competence

Leadership is about helping others achieve their own greatness and about teaching others how to bring forth the best of which they are capable. John Wooden believes effective leaders are first and foremost good teachers. He has noticed that among experienced coaches there is not always much difference in the technical knowledge of the game. He says the difference usually comes down to the ability of the leader to be an effective teacher in the process of creating a winning organization.⁴⁷

Great teachers win the hearts of their followers. Competent leaders provide their people with what they lack to include training and not just the technical aspects. Knowledge alone is not enough. A leader must be able to effectively convey their standards, values, ideals, beliefs, as well as their way of doing things. Expressing such things as honesty and trustworthy and by demonstrating that one's word is honorable and true are all leadership responsibilities of training within the organization. Whatever the context of training, the leader is responsible for teaching the organization.

One of the dilemmas or traps of leadership is for a leader to spend more time doing than teaching. The higher the leadership position the more time must be devoted to teaching. The key is for the leader to teach their methods and principals so their followers can apply them. One of the best and most effective ways to teach is through mentoring. Young people especially, have a serious need for mentoring, especially when it comes to their careers and personal growth. Strategic leaders encourage seasoned members to impart their wisdom, knowledge, and experience to those less

experienced. Remember, leaders are made and not born, and strategic leaders understand the importance of developing their successors.

A second fundamental quality of competence is communicating through listening. Dale Carnegie, in the classic book *How to Win Friends & Influence People* writes, "People who talk only of themselves think only of themselves. ...Remember that the people you are talking to are a hundred times more interested in themselves and their wants and problems than they are in you and your problems."⁴⁸ An easy way to become a good communicator is to become a good listener.

Billy Graham was noted for always listening to people because he was always learning. Abraham Lincoln realized that people were a major source of information and that to be a good leader he had to stay close to them.⁴⁹ It is important as a leader to hear other suggestions. The greatest ideas come from the people of the organization. Competent leaders are usually those who are consistently willing to listen and learn, as well as having the confidence to employ individuals who are not afraid to voice their opinion.

Listening attentively is a fundamental quality of leadership competency. The average person has no idea what it means to be listened to intently. Paying exclusive attention to the person who is talking is very important and effective leaders understand that nothing is as flattering.

One final fundamental quality to competency is instilling enthusiasm in people and in the organization through motivation and appreciation. Vince Lombardi said, "Success is based upon a spiritual quality, a power to inspire others."⁵⁰ Vince Lombardi tried to learn everything possible about his players and would use that knowledge to

motivate them. Competent leaders strive to inspire and motivate with purpose and meaning, not with threats. Dwight Eisenhower once said, "You don't lead by hitting people over the head. That's assault, not leadership."⁵¹ Most people are motivated by the desire to feel important and to make a difference. All members of an organization need to feel their job makes a difference and that they are connected to the success of the [their] organization. Competent leaders have the ability to motivate and inspire by creating a climate for success.

Leadership is essentially a people business. Competent leaders know how to work with people and how to make certain each person plays a valuable role. It is crucial for a leader to praise his people, what is even more amazing is how much it means to a subordinate on the receiving end. Norman Vincent Peale, one of the most influential clergymen of his time writes, "The longing to be liked, to be held in esteem, to be a sought-after person, is fundamental in us."⁵² According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the number-one reason people leave their jobs is because they do not feel appreciated.⁵³ Competent leaders offer people meaning and appreciation, and inspire their followers by making them feel important.

Final Discussion

Strategic leaders find the greatness in an organization and have the vision, character, and competence to help its members find it in them. The challenge of effective leadership is to get the best out of one's subordinates. Leaders lead people and in large organizations they lead the people who lead other people. Strategic leaders have the vision to see possibilities before they become obvious.

Ability may help get a leader to the top but it takes character to stay there. Character counts, and without it even the most talented individual is a danger to the organization. Strong character is crucial because it sets the example in right and wrong. The force of character is cumulative. Good values, like a magnet, attract good people and create an environment of integrity. True character begins with the person at the top.

Competence is essential, and a leader embraces it through continuous learning. A leader must not hesitate to innovate and change with the times. The leader who stands still is not progressing and will not remain a leader for long. As soon as a leader ceases to learn, his usefulness as a teacher and mentor comes to an end. When a leader ceases to learn, other people cease to learn from him.

It takes a leader to develop a leader. More than four-out-of five leaders have emerged as leaders because of the impact mentoring by other leaders had upon them.⁵⁴ Senior leaders, when given the opportunity to grow and the responsibility to mentor, can exert a powerful force in any organization. Strategic leaders develop subordinate leaders and trust them to do the right thing. The result is a greater quality of followers and future leaders. The leader makes the pieces fit together in a way that accomplishes the mission and best serves the overall organization.

Conclusion

Leaders are made, not born. Effective leadership grows out of vision, character, and competence. Effective leaders understand the strategic picture and have the vision to think two or three steps ahead of the organization. Vision is a picture of the possible, and the strategic leader has the responsibility to transform that possibility into reality.

How a leader influences others determines the well-being of an organization, and the vision is the starting point that determines the direction the organization will take.

Effective leaders have the character to set the example, and are able to create an environment of strong values. Strategic leaders are effective because of their strong character. Character is more than honesty; it is who a person is on the inside and the respectable qualities that make that person on the outside.

Effective leaders are competent, and regardless of specific leadership skills are able to make the best possible decisions for the organization. A leader's job is to accomplish the mission and get the best from each member of the organization. The more competent the leader, the greater the potential for influence the leader will have upon the people in the organization.

Vision, character, and competence are leadership principles that span a variety of contexts; business, sports, politics, religion, and the military. These are three essential strategic leadership principles necessary to achieve the mission and to shape the future of any organization.

Endnotes

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