

On the Road of Experience: Seven Observations on Leadership

Successful leadership requires character as well as competence, and followers rather than subordinates

By **David Dodd**

*On the road of experience,
I'm trying to find my own way...
If there's an answer
It's just that it's just that way.*

—John Denver

Like many managers, I have shelves filled with books on leadership. Add to that courses, seminars, lectures, and meetings attended, and I feel I've amassed a veritable treasure chest of information on leadership over the years. If this isn't enough, a seemingly endless supply of leadership publications is available online. I often search out these sources of ideas and information for two reasons: unquenchable interest and practical necessity. While gems of wisdom can be found with digging, however, the one realization I take from my journey through this life is that experience is the best teacher.

I consider myself exceedingly blessed by the leadership opportunities and experiences I have had in my personal and professional lives. In retrospect, they form a study in contrasts: excellent leaders and mentors versus unsurpassed examples of poor leadership; outstanding organizations with wonderful people versus dysfunctional organizations condemned by incorrigibility; memories of cherished successes versus haunting failures and opportunities lost; mentors who invested their valuable time and patience versus others obsessed with themselves. Not surprisingly, the lessons provided by failures and poor examples are the most valuable and indelible.

Occasionally, I have the opportunity to share my experiences and lessons learned by leading seminars and writing articles, and I value these opportunities enormously. It is part of "giving back" to our profession and to the next generation of leaders—a passing of small tokens to others in return for those who showed me the same profound kindness. In truth, I'm certain I learn more from these experiences than the intended beneficiaries. The questions posed are challenging and reflective, often searching intently for the fundamental principles behind successful leaders—the magic recipe for success. In the face of these questions, I sometimes feel quite inadequate—a dry well of ideas in the face of their thirst for information. From the beginning, these discussions have led me to consider useful lessons gained through a quarter-century journey in leadership.

■ *Fundamentally, a leader is an agent for change.*

One of the most important things every leader must understand is the responsibility to work for change. We live in a dynamic and highly competitive world. Successful leaders work to continuously refine, realign, and improve their organizations and, in turn, their institutions. Our function should never be to "maintain the status quo" or "keep things running smoothly." The ultimate role of a leader is to envision a better future and work to make that vision a reality. This requires a passion for excellence and a competi-

tion with oneself to become better.

As goals and environmental factors change and challenges emerge, leaders must continuously improve their organizations to meet those challenges. The problem is, humans are not particularly fond of change. We are fond of creating environments of constancy and comfort. Only when actually experiencing conditions that require change will most people accept the accompanying uncertainty and discomfort. Moreover, organizations experience inertia, which takes considerable effort to overcome and effect change.

Humans have the extraordinary ability to dream and anticipate the future, and leadership requires this capacity. Our ability to lead depends upon our ability to instill in others a need for change, before they see or feel the reasons for the change. The ability to anticipate, envision, and inspire others to achieve is the essence of leadership.

■ *Leadership is situational.*

Most of us are programmed to think of leadership in terms of an idealized "Steven Covey world" of noble ideas and highly motivated followers.¹ This is not always the case. Not only does this view misrepresent reality, it forms a dangerous trap, particularly for younger and less experienced leaders. The skills and courage required to confront dysfunctional organizations, overcome extreme resistance, and effect fundamental change are very different from the skills required to lead well-developed organizations of excellent people.

Too often, new and highly idealistic leaders are thrown into the lions' dens of dysfunctional organizations and suffer for it. Three years ago, following a seminar I gave, an attendee rebuked me for making leadership sound so "primal" and difficult. At the time, she was a newly appointed CIO. Last summer, I saw her again. She had since returned to a faculty position, surviving less than two years as the head of a troubled IT organization. Throughout our careers, most of us will be called upon to address a variety of challenges at different levels of organizational development. We must be highly agile and adaptable to succeed.

Experience is indeed the best teacher for facing the types of adversities that will characterize most of our careers. The most effective leaders have been incrementally tempered through difficult challenges and adversity. Bennis and Thomas termed this process the "crucible."² The most common reason leaders fail is through failure to take decisive action when required. I stress this because failure rarely results from not knowing what action to take but from lacking the capacity to take it. That is the fundamental difference between knowledge and experience. Almost anyone can momentarily pilot a ship already set on a course, with clear skies and calm seas. The mark of a capable leader is the ability to meet the challenges of a world that is very often not that way.

■ *Leaders need followers.*

The depth of this concept and the ability to embrace it belie the simplicity of the words alone. One of the requirements for effective leadership is ego—the sense of self-confidence and self-esteem that make individuals both want to lead and believe that they can be effective as leaders. Indeed, the confidence that others have in leaders derives largely from the self-confidence those leaders feel and exhibit. The problem, of course, is that ego is the proverbial double-edged sword, cutting just as deeply both ways. The ego that propels some individuals to leadership can be distorted by others into merely

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commanding subordinates. Unlike dedicated followers, subordinates carry out orders and little else.

There is a vast difference between authority and leadership, and effective leaders understand this well. Mike Krzyzewski, the extraordinarily successful basketball coach at Duke University, knows that the success of his team depends on the preparation, character, confidence, desire, and teamwork of the players on the court. Krzyzewski will never touch a ball or make a play during the game. As with all leaders, his success is measured by the performance of his followers.

You can be many things without dedicated followers, but not a leader. Self-confidence, coupled with compassion and tempered by humility drawn from experience, are essential elements of leadership.

■ *Leadership derives from character and competence.*

So what do leaders have that makes others willing to follow them? Some believe it is the individual's level of skill and knowledge. I have found without exception that this is only part of the answer—and not the most important part. Competence in areas such as budget management, communication, technical knowledge, and other responsibilities of management positions are obviously important. While these skills can make you an effective administrator, however, they don't make you an effective leader, particularly one that others believe in and will follow.

Beyond competence lies the single most important foundation for leadership: character. The type of person you

are—more than anything else—influences the way others view you and whether they are willing to dedicate themselves to achieving your vision. In a large multicultural study on leadership, Kouzes and Posner³ found that dedicated followers consistently cited four characteristics describing leaders: honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent. The first three traits clearly have far more to do with character than with job skills. Individuals who are genuine and of sound character, as demonstrated by their actions rather than their words, engender trust and belief in others. This is the basis for phrases describing leaders such as "modeling the way" and "leading by example."

■ *Legitimate power is your greatest asset.*

Some mistakenly believe that power is negative and evil by nature, sought only by those hungry for control over others. Though the word has been highly stigmatized because of abuse, power is essential to leadership. Power represents the ability to influence others to do things they would not otherwise do, ideally for the common good. It is inherently neutral, with equal ability to be used wisely or poorly. Put simply, it is impossible to effect change without power.

Management literature describes many types of power in organizations—authoritative, utilitarian, coercive, and relational, among others—and it is critical to understand them. But the most important type of power for a leader is legitimate power. When followers believe that a leader acts in the best interests of the organization, employs fair and balanced judgment, is honest and can be trusted, the leader has legitimacy to lead.

A leader does not act for his or her own good, but for the good of others. The ability to instill in others a belief and dedication to your vision and values is the most important ability of a leader and depends primarily upon character. The committed engagement of your team unleashes the energy, enthusiasm, creativity, and loyalty of the hearts and minds of its members—a force of almost unlimited potential. The

true potential of an organization does not lie with the capabilities of the leader but with his or her capacity to inspire the capabilities of others.

■ *Leaders have to put it on the line.*

One of the hardest things to accept about leadership is that when the time comes, you must put everything on the line. This comes with the territory. Very early in my career, I saw the director of a public health department—a man I admired greatly—fired. He had refused to compromise his principles and acquiesce to the demands of a board of directors bent on eliminating services to minorities and the poor. He told me something at the time that I will never forget: if you are not willing to stake your job on the things you truly believe in, you have no integrity, and integrity is all you have as a professional. To your followers, peers, and superiors, this is the test of your commitment and dedication to the things you stand for. If your own level of commitment is found wanting, you can hardly expect others to believe in you.

If personal factors limit your ability to take a stand when you must, such as your ties to a particular place, your capacity as a leader is seriously compromised, and people will recognize it immediately. That's one of the most important compromises in taking a position where the buck can't be passed any further. Leaders have to put it all on the line when necessary, even if it means moving on to a new opportunity to preserve your integrity. If you aren't willing to do that, you should seriously reconsider your career decisions.

One of the areas in which I've worked hard over the years involves acquiring greater wisdom in choosing my battles and in being more creative and successful in winning those that must be fought. I have adopted a philosophy similar to the counsel of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who said we should choose our battles carefully, but if the cause is just and the fight unavoidable, never shrink from the responsibility. Leadership is not about survival in a position; it's about how much good you accomplish in that

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position. Your job is where you work today; your career is what you have accomplished after a lifetime.

■ *Keep things in perspective, and make it fun.*

One of the greatest measures of any team is how it handles adversity and how strong the bonds are that hold it together. In my organization, recruitment is viewed as the single most important thing we do. We seek individuals with the "right stuff" in terms of mindset and temperament. Skills are important, but the type of person we bring to the team today has an enormous impact on the future of the organization, its culture, and the bonds among its members. Teamwork is extremely important, and the most enjoyable and rewarding atmosphere is one in which the members care about one another and support one another, particularly through adversity.

If you've ever seen a meerkat colony, you may have been reminded of the way many organizations work. These wonderfully social animals are constantly aware of their environment, the other members of the colony, and any sign of danger. Their heads dart rapidly from left to right, searching each others' expressions for fear or reassurance. The scene, although comedic, holds a valuable lesson. The way a leader handles adversity and stress is witnessed by every member of the organization, and the leader's reaction has a great deal to do in determining theirs.

I make every attempt to include humor as part of my organization, and it pays off. No matter how serious the crisis, humor helps maintain perspec-

tive and provides a release. And it works wonders for disarming unhappy customers, as well.

When I worked for a large textile manufacturing company in an earlier part of my career, any downtime cost money and therefore was taken seriously. But we had a phrase to put things into perspective when situations became too heated: "We aren't saving lives here folks, we're making underwear." The older I become, the more I realize that life is indeed too short to take things too seriously, including ourselves.

Closing Thoughts

We are all traveling a road of experience on which we seek to become better leaders, no matter how small or large our teams. As I am constantly reminded by events along the way, this journey has a direction but no destination and lasts a lifetime. There are far easier ways to earn a living, but few endeavors are more rewarding.

I hold to the belief that there are only two things you leave behind in this world: your children, if you are so fortunate, and any good things you do for others. Leadership provides us with the opportunity to accomplish a great deal of good if we do it well and for the right reasons. May our journeys be long and rewarding. *C*

Endnotes

1. Stephen Covey is the author of such excellent works as *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* and *Principle-Centered Leadership*. Like most authors on leadership, though, he typically focuses on leadership at the higher levels of organizational development rather than on the far more common and difficult challenges involved in moving organizations to that level of attainment.
2. W. G. Bennis and R. J. Thomas, *Geeks and Geezers* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).
3. J. M. Kouzes and B. Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

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