

LEADERSHIP AS A CONTACT SPORT

by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

Being the leader of a major organization is similar to playing rugby: With no helmet or pads, you simply hold your ground as people wearing sharply spiked shoes charge toward you with a look that says they are about to tear the ears off your head. Perhaps I exaggerate, but then again, maybe not.

On a bad day, the description is pretty accurate. On a good day, the jabs to the stomach occur with less frequency but by the end of the day, the body is still black and blue.

CEOs have responsibility for all aspects of their organizations, whether or not the organizations are flat. CEOs coordinate, lead, direct, supply and satisfy multiple constituencies, even when some of them compete with each other for attention and resources. Whether in the profit-making or nonprofit world, a good leader gives most of the credit for success to the others on his or her team and accepts most of the blame alone. Some say it is a thankless job. Others say the rewards far outweigh the headaches when you and your comrades prevail.

Historically, becoming a CEO has been seen as the pinnacle of one's professional career, an appointment that comes

with prestige, a good compensation package, visibility, recognition by one's peers as a leader and a seat at the high-rollers' table. Climbing the ladder of success to the very top has been part of the American dream.

But then something changed. Overzealousness and impropriety by a few in the corporate and nonprofit world spoiled the landscape for the many. One only has to look at the melancholy stories of Enron, Adelphia Communications and the United Way to recall how scandals call into question how organizations are being led. Public confidence in CEOs has fallen and to many people, the position is seen as less appealing. Other positions provide many of the rewards, along with helmets and pads.

Congressional oversight committees, the news media and states' attorneys general are continually looking at the leadership of organizations, from colleges to corporations.

In this new environment, the hands of university leaders are tied by hovering accrediting agencies and government regulators, often believed by the academy to be more intrusive than constructive; the rising expectations of customers (students and their families), pushing for an ever higher level of personalized service in both academics and amenities, impose further constraints.

Deciding to become a university president, or a corporate CEO, is a lifestyle decision as well as a career choice. This new reality is not without consequences. In searches to fill open college presidencies, it is increasingly difficult to find a robust field of competent candidates. The top job was long seen as a sinecure, carrying prestige without the need for heavy lifting. Alumni were caring and forthcoming with donations, students and faculty were relatively passive, and the local government paid little attention to campus activities. Campus pranks were dismissed as overexuberance, or youthful indiscretions.

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By 2015, it is predicted that at least one G20 nation's critical infrastructure will be disrupted and damaged by online sabotage.

Source: Gartner, Inc., 2010





By the 1960s, however, campuses were no longer peaceful sanctuaries: Faculty asked for higher salaries and better laboratories; students protested injustice and strove to cure the world of all its ills; mayors looked for payments for local government services, like fire and police protection; and alumni expected winning basketball and football teams. Like members of Congress, college presidents are now out almost every night of the week raising money.

The sad fact is, when the job is all-consuming, fewer people seek the mantle. University presidents step down; CEOs retire early. Only months ago, the head of a major pharmaceutical company resigned, saying the job had worn him out. The recent economic crisis has added enormous pressures to the lives of academic and business leaders alike.


Leadership is complex — a combination of innate and learned traits. It is about inspiring others, building teams and causing individuals, organizations and institutions to move along a given path to a common goal. There is a spiritual quality to it, and one hopes, a moral quality, too. Leadership and ethics should be linked. Leadership is also about courage — the ability to make a decision with less than perfect information, on behalf of others as well as for yourself. It is about taking a stand and standing for something. As Thomas Jefferson said, “In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.”

Programs in leadership are springing up on campuses, teaching students skills not necessarily for becoming college presidents or CEOs, but in all cases for taking charge of their own careers and rising to the top of whatever profession they

enter. At Rutgers University, Ph.D. students are learning to become academic administrators, through programs exposing them to what is described as the “behind-the-scenes view” of the complexities of running large, diverse organizations. Being a scholar of the Renaissance is not the same as being a Renaissance man in the 21st century.

But what is often difficult to teach is that leadership — unlike rugby — can be both a group and a solitary sport. (In fact, as a leader, you can have teammates and even followers who are not always friends and are even rivals.)

In a recent interview, Andrew Cosslett, CEO of InterContinental Hotels Group, said leaders must be confident and positive. That is necessary, but not sufficient. They also need to understand that important jobs come with tension, stress and ambiguity. And, just as in rugby, you need to rely on your teammates because, “there’s a chance you’re going to break your neck or have a very bad injury,” Cosslett said. To be a leader, you have to keep “the flag flying no matter what’s going on around you.”

Not everyone is confident enough (or sufficiently undaunted) to play a full contact sport like rugby without a helmet or pads. And, to be honest, despite the courses, not everybody can be a leader. To be a leader means you are part of a team, even when you are not quite a member. 

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