

THE MYSTERY OF LEADERSHIP

by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

You cannot learn to dance by reading a book or by practicing with a broom, and leadership is like dancing.

There are countless books — probably more than anyone can bear to read — promising to tell you the secrets of leadership. I will save you time and money: there are no secrets, and if anyone had them, he would be a fool to reveal them. There are also courses in leadership that offer sound training in certain skills. But unless you get up and dance, no course or program is going to teach you how to lead. You learn on your own. You learn by doing.

I arrived at this conclusion after 30 years as a university president, first at the University of Hartford and afterward at the George Washington University. Along the way, I frequently served on the boards of nonprofits and corporations.

It is fair to ask, since neither broom nor book works, “How does anyone become a leader?” I could say, “I really do not know.” But that is not sufficient. So I will give several answers which I hope will give you something to think about.

To begin with, there are three innate qualities that are mysterious and impossible to quantify, but real nonetheless. The first quality is an ability to lead. Some people have it, and others clearly do not. How this comes about is probably a question for psychologists and, possibly, philosophers. We might as well ask why some people are born with perfect pitch. It is, again, a mysterious but a real quality.

A general is a leader, but so are captains and sergeants. In fact, you can make a good case for the leadership at every rank being no less important than that at the very top. For example, and sticking with the military imagery, I know someone who was promoted from a middling-to-high academic position to the presidency of a small university. Obviously, the board of trustees thought they were hiring a general — someone with a command of strategy and a good strategy in mind. He could lead at that lower level — but I was not sure that he had the strategic ability and the innate ability to lead. I was right. He lasted less than two years in his new job.

I take no pleasure in his failure or in retelling this story, but I offer it as an illustration of what I mean by innate ability. I also retell it as a caution. It is not easy to look at yourself in

the mirror and say, “I’m a colonel.” We all want to believe that our inner general is there just bursting to get out and take on the world. But for many of us, there is no inner general and there never will be. There are people who are made to be world-class vice presidents or deans or foremen. In fact, most people are cut out for being something less than the top leader. It is no small thing to see yourself dispassionately as what you are. In other words, lead at your level of leadership.

The second quality is a companion to innate ability, and that is innate desire. A leader has to want to be a leader, has to want the responsibility as much as the glory, has to enjoy facing the risks and their consequences that arise in any position of leadership and has to be willing to get by on four hours of sleep. The money alone is rarely, if ever, adequate compensation and, I bet, never what motivates the best leaders.

There is more to the mystery of the innate desire. Obviously, a leader has followers. Thus, a leader must want to deal with other people, including a range of stakeholders. A political instinct is slightly different from what are so-called people skills. A leader has to want to transact with others, to get their ideas and share his or her own and to derive some good from meetings and conferences. The French novelist Romain Rolland wrote about “the joy of being many.” Perhaps that is the best characterization of what I am trying to define. A leader needs to find joy simply in being in groups.

The third innate quality is sometimes called charisma. But, that word is overused so I will use “presence,” a theatrical word instead. Presence is hard to define precisely. Like the famous definition of obscenity, we all know it when we see or experience it. Presence is not the dominance of the alpha type. It is not charm, or good looks, although they never hurt. Perhaps it is something in our leaders’ pheromones, something we unconsciously inhale or ingest in the presence of a person whom we want to follow. And, of course, that is the key — no matter what the right word is, we want to follow him or her even if we are not sure why. And, we do follow. Leaders who have this elusive quality may project it from afar, and people who respond to it may barely know the leader they are eager to follow.

I have not brought up these mysterious characteristics to

dismay you. You cannot learn them. But if you have them, there are things you can do to learn to be a good leader.

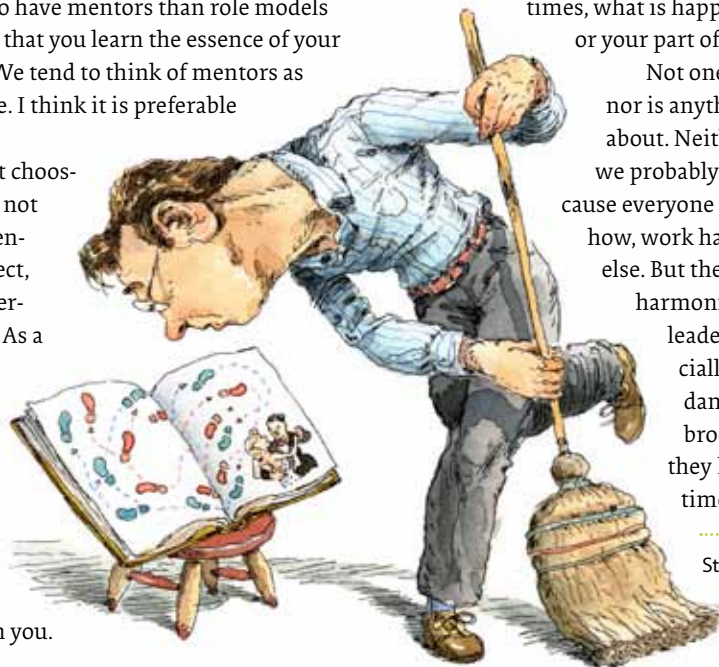
An education in leadership needs to begin with observation. You have to keep your eyes wide open. And you need to keep them open everywhere. It is natural for us to look at others where we work for models of leadership, but it is limiting to look only there. What you can observe at, say, a homeowners' association, the PTA or a cycling group can be at least as instructive as what you see at work because, whenever you are in a group, someone is leading, however subtly.

It is also true that the leader may not have an official position or title: he or she seems to guide things without a formal office or authority. This is the quality of presence that I referred to above. Whatever it may be, it is useful to identify people who are leading, at work or elsewhere, and to ask yourself how they do that. You will certainly come up with many different answers, and that should not trouble you. There is no one way to lead. And different environments and circumstances will produce, or even require, different modes of leadership. It is not just that the cycling club is different from the corporation. It is that the people in the two organizations are different, the relationships among them are different and the demands the organizations face are different.

If I am right about this, then there are further implications. The first is that participation is as important as observation. If you do not participate with others, there is no school where you can learn from your observations and about the dynamics of human relations that you need to understand. Practice, as we are all reminded, makes perfect — or at least pretty good. A second implication is that a leader has to be a chameleon, not changing colors to hide, but to quickly adapt to new environments.

It is more important to have mentors than role models because it is from mentors that you learn the essence of your craft, trade or profession. We tend to think of mentors as teachers, and so they can be. I think it is preferable to think of them as guides.

A piece of advice about choosing the perfect mentor: Do not try. There are no perfect mentors because no one is perfect, and no one will ever be a perfect match for anyone else. As a result, you must settle not for what you want but for what you need. You certainly want a mentor whose intellect and temperament complement your own, with whom you feel comfortable and who feels comfortable with you.



But to find these intangible qualities will most likely mean that you will need more than one mentor. If you have too many, however, you risk turning your mentors into consultants.

You can solve this problem by having a couple of mentors at a time, or as I did, by having serial mentors. At different times in my life, I was ready for, and in great need of, different kinds of guidance. Fortunately, I found the right person each time I needed a mentor.

Once we become leaders, whether as sergeants or generals, the learning curve does not flatten out. To the contrary, it gets steeper because the higher we rise, the more there is to know, the more complexities there are and the more daunting is the juggling act we have to perform.

To deal with the learning curve, I developed four rules that helped me over the last 30 years. I do not guarantee they will do you good, but I am sure they will do no harm.

First, I make a point of writing a personal reply to every letter and message I get. This is time-consuming, but it enables me to connect with strangers and acquaintances.

Second, always keep in mind that a good strategy is only as good as the tactics used to implement it. A big new idea is just something written down on paper. To make it work requires the appropriate tactics.

Third, I always appreciate the importance of casual perception — how I appear to others as I walk down the street. If you want collegiality and civility, then you must be collegial and civil. If you want energy and enthusiasm, then you must project energy and enthusiasm yourself.

Fourth, never underestimate the importance of the media. You always need to be camera-ready. That does not mean every hair must be in place and every word rehearsed and polished in advance. It does mean that you need to know, at all times, what is happening in your organization, or your part of it, and explain it clearly.

Not one of these four points is easy, nor is anything else I have been talking about. Neither is leadership. If it were, we probably would not need leaders because everyone would be a leader and, somehow, work harmoniously with everyone else. But the world and our work are not harmonious. That is why we need leaders. And, that is why we especially need leaders practiced in dancing with people rather than brooms. Only in that way do they know how to keep us in time with the music.

Stephen Joel Trachtenberg is president emeritus at the George Washington University.