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Leading with Character and Competence

Moving Beyond Title, Position, and Authority

Timothy R. Clark • Berrett-Koehler © 2016 • 192 pages

Leadership

Take-Aways

- Leadership is influence. Exercise leadership by choosing how to live your life.
- Some people fall prey to 10 “misleading leadership theories,” such as believing that charisma and slick speechmaking are necessary leadership traits.
- “Influence” is the basis of real leadership. It exists on a continuum between two extremes: “manipulation” and “coercion.”
- Strong leaders use “persuasion,” which lies in the middle of that spectrum.
- Your ability to persuade stems from your “character and competence.”
- The cornerstones of competence are “learning, change, judgment” and “vision.”
- The cornerstones of character are “integrity, humility, accountability” and “courage.”
- Great leaders possess character and competence; dangerous leaders lack character but have competence.
- Your moral character fuels your leadership. Without it, you could crumble when facing difficulties.
- Being humble brings clarity, protects you from the demands of your ego, allows you to appreciate others who do well and makes you more flexible.

Recommendation

Every day, in every action, you choose whether you want to be a leader. To increase your leadership skills, you must build your “competence and character” to work effectively and to inspire others to follow you. Consultant Timothy R. Clark argues that “influence” forms the basis of leadership, no matter how many people you influence – one or many, and that influence also requires being capable and of good character. *getAbstract* recommends his presentation to those who are working on becoming leaders or becoming better leaders no matter their current position.

Summary

Useless Theories

When people discuss leadership, they often cite supposed rules that actually have little validity. Be wary of succumbing to these 10 incorrect, “misleading leadership theories”:

1. You need “charisma” to project yourself as a leader.
2. You must have a way with words to become a leader.
3. You need to have “power” for others to recognize you as a leader. It helps to hold a position with an important title.
4. You must have age on your side.
5. You must work on extremely important issues.
6. Leadership requires that other people admire you.
7. Your claim to leadership is stronger if a lot of people know you.
8. For others to see you as a leader, you must get the upper hand on your competitors.
9. Leaders make a lot of money or have access to a big budget.
10. Being a leader necessitates academic credentials.

“The Spectrum of Influence”

People can meet all of the supposed, conventional requirements of being a leader and still fail to lead. On the other hand, a great leader might not meet any of these supposed qualifications.

“Leadership is not an ethereal concept. It is not as cinematic as you might think. It’s about one simple and profoundly human thing: influence.”

An amazingly simple idea – “influence” – forms the basis of real leadership. With influence, you can cause people to extend themselves and to act nobly. It doesn’t matter how many people you influence – one or many. People naturally have an influence on each other. Even if you don’t want to influence others, you will have that impact, and others also will influence you. Decide how you want to affect people and toward what goals you want to shape their decisions and actions. Exercise leadership by the way you live your life.

“May we find joy in knowing that leadership can be found, and indeed is mostly found, in small and simple and unspectacular acts that influence others to do better and be better.”

Think of influencing others as an activity that unfolds along a continuum. At one extreme lies “manipulation” – seeking advantage by telling falsehoods. This ranges from the innocuous (a mother cajoling her child to eat) to destructive manipulative behavior (threats loan sharks use to trap unwary borrowers). “Coercion” lies on the other end of the spectrum. Coercion means forcing someone to do something that they wouldn’t do unless you pushed them.

“For centuries society embraced a permanent learning model: learning once for permanent qualification.”

True leaders can exert “persuasion,” the midpoint between manipulation and coercion. Persuasion stems from “character and competence.” When you have good character, people have faith in you. They believe you will do what you say. Competence gives you self-confidence built on your confidence that you have the skills and ability to fulfill your commitments.

Leadership Categories

Leaders don’t have to scare others or take advantage of them in order to influence them. They can lead because people respect their character and their competence, the basic elements of leadership. To increase your ability to lead, build your character so that you inspire others and increase your competence so you can work effectively. Several leadership types derive from different combinations of character and competence:

1. **“Great leaders”** – These leaders have high character and competence. Mastering both traits enables you to make a substantial impact on the people around you. They enrich the inspiration and direction you can offer others as a leader. The innate strength of your character prevents you from sabotaging yourself by pretending, overreaching in your aspirations for rank and position, or being too fond of authority and control.
2. **“Ineffective leaders”** – These leaders possess high character but low competence. Such leaders try to postpone challenging tasks. Fear overwhelms them and they shy away from making an effort, so they attempt only what they feel comfortable doing. Some leaders begin by being ineffective, but if something impels them to reach for higher achievement, they tend to become more effective, even if they improve slowly.
3. **“Failed leaders”** – These leaders have neither character nor competence. Failed leaders don’t take responsibility for their actions. They refuse to accept other people’s perceptions of their performance. They seldom humbly and honestly consider the demands on them so they can become more effective. They give little credence to others’ contributions and don’t admit that becoming good at anything takes effort. Such leaders still seek high positions, in order to hide behind titles and protect their own interests.
4. **“Dangerous leaders”** – These leaders are highly competent but they lack character. A person with great intellect who isn’t honest has the traits of a dangerous leader. These leaders set no limits on what they want for themselves and they sacrifice their morality to achieve material ends. They willingly forfeit the good of other people to fulfill their own interests. They are a hazard with a deleterious effect on other human beings.

“The Four Cornerstones of Character”

You can build up four important aspects of your moral fiber. Without them, you could crumble in the face of leadership challenges. They make up your moral fiber and keep you from succumbing to the temptation to accept something that you should not. The four cornerstones and their corresponding primary traits are:

1. “Integrity”

The combination of home, religious life and school once “socialized” children and impressed them with the importance of integrity. However, many elements of today’s society seem to have turned away from enforcing consistent, unchanging principles.

“There are few principles in organizational life that have died such a violent and ignominious death as the idea of permanent competence.”

Every human being faces temptation, but the mantle of integrity depends on your accepting a set of values that you will never violate, no matter what the temptation. People must choose sides. When you undertake leadership, you affect those around you. You are liable for your actions and have personal responsibility for separating right from wrong. You reap the benefits or live with the consequences of your actions. Similarly, when other people’s actions affect you, use your judgment as you reflect on the impact of their influence and how much persuasion to accept.

2. “Humility”

Humility comes from accepting your fallibility and the limits of your knowledge. Being humble makes you more flexible and prevents you from becoming intoxicated by an inflated sense of self. Humility brings clarity and the vision to act ethically. It protects you from the demands of your ego and helps you feel satisfaction when others succeed.

“When you gain a personal vision of what you can become, that internal sense of a future state changes behavior.”

Contrast humility with arrogance, which blinds you and leads you into making wrong decisions. Human beings depend on each other. Especially within an institutional framework, individuals can do little alone. With humility, you can accept that you depend on others and feel thankful for their contribution. That sense of appreciation protects you from arrogance. Humble leaders accept facts. But leaders who yield to their ego will distort reality to highlight their great work if things go well and to deny responsibility when they face failure. Humble leaders accept bad news with equanimity. Arrogant leaders lash out against those around them.

3. “Accountability”

Outstanding leaders believe in being accountable for events on their watch. By contrast, “poor leaders” don’t want anyone to assess their performance. After the American War of Independence, General George

Washington submitted his resignation to the US Continental Congress. Washington had done such remarkable things that he could have had whatever rewards he wanted. He could have declared himself king. Yet this quiet man chose not to take advantage of the situation. He relinquished his military position.

“Procrastination is a legitimate business principle. Just make sure you’re using it to your advantage.”

Great leaders take the responsibility for their bad decisions and willingly change course, even if others don’t point out their errors. They guard against three human tendencies that camouflage acceptance of responsibility: They don’t deny facts, or hold others responsible or justify their actions by suggesting they had no choice due to factors they couldn’t control.

4. “Courage”

Leaders need courage because they confront hazards that complicate their choices and can force them to make mistakes. Leaders must fashion situations anew. While managers may work to preserve what others have created, leaders must upset the current state of affairs even if everyone feels comfortable. Most professional or personal restraints begin within a person, but improving yourself from within takes valor.

“The ability to perform moral reasoning does not make you moral; it’s doing what is moral that makes you moral.”

Dealing with someone you influence who is frightened is not the same thing as helping someone who is apathetic. You can teach someone who experiences fear, but it’s harder to help someone who lacks interest in anything.

Most success comes from “pluck,” persistence and bravery, not intellect. People with pluck have the fortitude to battle on, despite the odds. You need pluck to listen to others and really pay attention to what they say. It takes even more bravery to encourage people to speak up when they disagree with you. Outstanding leaders ask others to explain their own perceptions of whether something would work or not.

“The Four Cornerstones of Competence”

To understand the relationship between character and competence, consider a building. Character is the foundation, and competence is the structure that stands on the foundation. Competence has four main components with corresponding primary traits:

1. “Learning”

Change moves swiftly. For example, people who work in “cellphone forensics” need to update their knowledge of the relevant technology every two months.

“As a human being, you confront moral choices that test your integrity. Leaders with integrity govern themselves. They regulate their own behavior and impose their own limits.”

Old career models in which you acquired skills to get a job and saved for retirement are now irrelevant. Globalization and the increased speed of obsolescence mean you must learn as fast as changes occur or perish professionally. Some baby boomers who may have hoped to hang onto their jobs based on what they learned a long time ago have found that to stay in the workforce they need new knowledge. The ones who gain new skills and insights will endure.

“A vision is a seedling of reality, a portrait of the future, a life-giving force.”

Stay willing to learn. Cultivate “learning agility.” Learn faster than the pace of change. Take responsibility for learning, work with others, and stay flexible and passionate in your quest for knowledge. Work on developing the skill of learning on your own. Once you leave school, make the effort to gain new knowledge without someone teaching you or structuring a course for you.

2. “Change”

The accelerating pace of change increases the challenges that face leaders and the need to adapt. Accept that the status quo is ephemeral. Adopt the attitude that Peter Drucker labeled as a “planned abandonment mentality.” This means acknowledging that you and your business must confront a steady loss of competitive advantage, accompanied by the need to keep renewing your edge. Accept the upheavals and shifts in the business landscape due to the rate of change and the interconnectedness of the global economy. Go beyond perceiving the rate of change. Adapt constantly to cope with its consequences.

3. “Judgment”

Leaders must develop their capacity for good judgment, the third component of competence. Having sound judgment enables you to see things in context and to consider the likely outcomes of a variety of courses of action. Using judgment, leaders can select the people they want working with them and the strategies they want to pursue.

4. “Vision”

Develop your ability to conceptualize the future. Think about what could transpire before it occurs and consider how you can shape it. Try to become farsighted beyond ordinary planning. Draw on your vision when things happen you didn’t anticipate. Draw guidance from your vision, backed by your ability to buck convention to deal with leadership challenges as necessary.

About the Author

Timothy R. Clark, PhD, founded LeaderFactor, a change and strategy consultancy, and BluEQ, an emotional intelligence assessment firm. He writes on large-scale change and strategic agility.



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