

## The Myths of Leadership

Leadership development programmes have proliferated over the last decade, many with their fair share of criticism. Despite millions being spent on leadership development in Malaysia alone each year, we often hear laments of a leadership deficit, or even a leadership crisis. Public confidence in leadership appears to be on a decline with many attributing the current economic challenges to poor leadership.

Much of this has to do with false impressions of what makes a great leader. Of course, when it comes to leadership, there is no one size fits all and there is a multitude of traits and styles that are not mutually exclusive in effectiveness. But just as there are timeless truths of good leadership, there are also myths. Here are five:

### **Myth 1: Good leaders ooze charisma**

Whenever people are asked to list the attributes of leadership, charisma almost always makes the list. While some great leaders are known for their charisma, think Steve Jobs, Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela; there are countless others who are also great leaders despite not being what one would call charismatic.

One good example is Angela Merkel, the Chancellor who is very likely to go down the history books as a truly effective global leader. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi, with his slight stature and quiet demeanour, could be considered the antithesis of charisma.

According to research by Jim Collins, in his book, *Good to Great*, the best organisations are not necessarily led by extroverted charismatics, but instead have leaders with a long-term view, with genuineness of purpose, who are devoted

and hardworking, who are flexible in the face of changing circumstances and also who are quite happy to lie low out of the limelight. According to Collins, exceptional leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. Their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves. Many of these amazing leaders are unknown names, but they have brought glory to the brands we admire and that continue to lead in their industries.

In an era of information and increasing scepticism, thinkers and technocrats are deemed as more valuable as leaders than those who are adept at enticing with their personal charm. In fact, there are several examples of very charismatic individuals who were responsible for taking their organisations or countries into troubled waters. If an organisation is heading in the wrong direction, a charismatic person at the helm can certainly take it there faster.

However, if a leader possesses integrity, intelligence, a collaborative nature and a mature but open attitude toward problem solving, having charisma is just icing on the cake; but it cannot stand alone.

### **Myth 2: Position makes a leader**

Anyone who has ever had a boss will attest that not all of them demonstrated true leadership qualities. In fact, when people are asked to think about how many of their previous bosses were good leaders, the answer usually lingers around zero to one.

Position, title and authority are often confused with leadership, as if leadership automatically happens when someone makes it to the top. If

this were true, it implies that anyone can be a leader, and herein lies another myth. Many people make it to the top more out of political acumen than true leadership qualities.

True leadership is a choice, one that is made by individuals regardless of their position. It can exist at any level of an organisation and the best organisations identify these and provide the individuals in question with the avenues that can harness their abilities towards positive outcomes.

More than position, leadership is a decision to accept personal responsibility to bring about positive change, and to inspire and motivate others to act in ways that achieve a shared vision.

### **Myth 3: Leaders are born, not made**

Probably one of the most common misconceptions about leadership is that people either have or lack the natural predisposition, a genetic x-factor so to speak, to be a great leader. The debate about nature versus nurture is one that has gone on for generations, but the archaic 'great man theory' asserting that only certain people are born with the traits that make them capable of leading, has long been debunked. Fortunately, so has the associated myth that the best leaders are men and that women are genetically not predisposed to lead.

People rarely develop leadership acumen without first experiencing a series of experiences that impact their thinking, behaviour, and ultimately leadership success. These experiences shape one's perspectives and determine how one navigates the world around them. It is impossible for anyone to be born with these experiences. They can only occur as a result of interactions with others in their environment.

This is where emotional intelligence comes into the picture, and with it, traits like self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills and empathy. People are never born with these. They can only be learnt.

### **Myth 4: Anyone can be taught to be a leader**

While this myth may seem like it is contradictory the previous one, what it really means is that while leaders are made and not born, not everyone can be moulded to be one. Apart from the prerequisites of self-knowledge and the authenticity, the desire to lead must come from within.

To put it another way, leadership cannot be taught, only learnt. One can attend as many leadership development programmes and read as many books on leadership as possible, but all this does is build a library of information. Just like teaching ethics in law schools and business schools cannot prevent politicians and executives from behaving unethically, knowing more about leadership is not the same as being a better leader. The latter requires a firm resolve and the associated actions and behaviours.

This is where the learning part comes in. Only when there exists the appetite to rise up to the leadership challenge, will people act in accordance with the principles of leadership gained from the teaching. The hard truth behind this, therefore, is that while many may be selected by their organisations to attend leadership development programmes, only the self-aware, authentic and motivated few will benefit from them in a real way.

### **Myth 5: Leaders must have followers**

It may sound oxymoronic to say that you don't need followers to be a great leader. Certainly many great leaders in the past were measured by the support and admiration they could garner from their (sometimes cult-like) followership.

However, consider the following postulation: today's leaders must have collaborators, not followers. The old model of leadership focused on the single, powerful individual who created a vision and sold it down to others. The command-and-control style of leadership worked well in command-and-control type organisations.

Today, we know that this is not how business is done. The sell-down vision has been replaced almost completely by shared vision. How then can we hold on to the old leader-follower models? The idea of collaborative leadership manifests in environments of networked minds and collective talent from a diverse pool. The intellectual power generated through such systems will far surpass the capacity of even the smartest, most commanding and most charismatic individual.

To take the idea further, in effective teams, everyone can be a leader with each member possessing their own set of expertise that they bring to the table for the collective good. This resonates with the earlier notion that one does need position to be a leader.

At the end of the day, leaders may have followers or they may have collaborators, but the point is this; true leaders do not need followers. They are not after popularity or support. They have a bigger motivation. True leaders see themselves as mere guardians of their cause, whether it is a corporation, country or classroom. True leaders also bring out leaders in others to carry the shared vision forward.

In the wise words of Lao Tzu, *“A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”*

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