

Courageous Leadership

By
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In classes I teach on the subject of leadership, most business students, when asked if they are leaders, either keep their hands down or slowly, hesitantly raise them. When I ask them for their definition of a leader, I hear words such as charismatic, great communicator, bold, daring, decisive, demanding, hard-driving. Then I ask what leaders do, and the responses I get are make decisions, manage crises, solve problems, get things done. Finally, when asked for names of leaders. They say Kennedy, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, Washington.

Leadership is looked upon as a larger-than-life activity, reserved for the chosen few. However, in today's world, everyone must become not only the leader of their own life, but the leader of others at various times and circumstances, effectively, efficiently, and with success.

We can no longer wait for the boss, the teacher, the president, the spouse or the friend to think, plan and decide events for us. As more people are searching for fulfillment, enrichment and meaning in their lives and work, we will have to take more responsibility, for others as well as ourselves.

Warren Bennis says we are having a crisis of leadership. It can be said that the leadership crisis, while the most invisible of all the major problems we face, is also the most urgent. Cynicism, perplexity of what-to-do, changing values and a loss of faith in those who lead is rampant, and growing. Unfortunately, almost everyone gleans their definition about leadership from high profile individual. For many looking outwardly for leadership, these can be disappointing times.

People need to ask "Who is leading? Do we allow others to make all the decisions? Have we lost our spirit?"

"Leadership is desperately needed in every aspect of our society," states author Jeanine Just. Most organizations and institutions need to transform in order to stay alive, grow and prosper. For such transformation to take place, more leaders must come forth and take responsibility. This will take COURAGE.

Leadership is a mindset, a state of being. It is about "becoming" what you really are, rather than "changing" into something new. We all know that being who you are all the time is either frowned upon, dangerous or downright scary. To contribute the best of what we have to offer requires each of us to know, trust and reveal our inner self.

To change an organization, institution or society requires individuals within to change. I say all people need to get in touch with their inner core first. Discover who they are, what is important, what they are good at and where they enjoy spending their time and using their skills.

When clarity abounds, it becomes easier and productive for each person to lend themselves and offer their own brand of leadership, when needed.

Each person has a valuable contribution to make. Each person is a key link to the success of every organization. Whether large or small, there are no insignificant players. Buckminster Fuller said, "There is no more room on planet earth for passengers – we all must become part of the crew." Just comment, "Each of us must start by taking a leadership role in our individual lives." Before we can be valuable to others, we must be true to ourselves.

Looking within is the first step. Courageous leaders know their values, what is most motivating to them. They develop a clear and compelling picture in their mind of what they want to do. They look to their personal strengths and areas of interest, and work toward their potential, not just their goals.

For those who like definitions, the following words would define courageous leaders who work with others:

Trustworthy, Honest, Listener, Positive, Empathetic, Focused, Sensitive, Open, Communicative, Sense of Humor, Intuitive, Mature, Respectful, Questioner, Responsible, Delivers on Promises, Cherishes Diversity, Persuasive, Conceptualizes, Right Conduct, Accountable, Fun.

Courageous leaders go beyond the current designated leaders of the day. Besides holding positions of power and authority, they paint a complete picture of what their organization stands for and creates a common purpose. They focus on desired outcomes rather than constantly looking back at what went wrong. Courageous leaders create meaning by focusing on intrinsic motivators such as dignity, community and caring. They honor people first, have a firm belief in decency and fairness, and teach people to liberate and lead themselves.

The ultimate in courageous leadership begins from a place of wanting to serve first. When you want to help others, develop people, build relationships and involve people, you create an environment that attracts the best from others.

Courageous leaders always ask, "What are we trying to do? What needs to be done?" They then get on with it, building a team environment. They "make no little plans!"

The diagram below best shows how courageous leadership germinates. It is an inside-out evolution. Its essence is performance. It is hard work. It aligns the needs of those within and outside – producers and customers.

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