



on Leadership

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“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.”

Explorer Ernest Shackleton in a 1890 job ad for the first Antarctic expedition

As much as that ad says about the caliber of people who applied for the job (and hundreds did!), it says even more about the leader who placed it. Truly great leaders have always risked what they hold most dear in order to achieve what they hold most important. The great challenge of leadership at that level, of course, is to communicate the vision to those who follow in such a way that they will walk out onto the ice without hesitation. As we survey the world around us today, from the macro events of war and global politics, to the micro level at our own kitchen tables, one thing is clear: the world, our nation, our communities and our families have never been in greater need of decisive, effective leadership.

For the purpose of this article, I define leadership as *doing what is right intentionally*, without regard to personal cost or consequence. That encompasses a much wider range of people, actions and activities than is usually included in conversations about leadership; i.e., just political or business leaders. They are important, but I am mostly concerned with leadership that can fairly be called ‘great,’ not the leadership activities that simply aim to do things right, but leadership that endeavors to do the right thing.

In academia, the debates about leadership tend to focus on whether leadership skills come from nature, nurture, or some combination of the two. Psychologists split when it comes to deciding whether a particular individual has become a leader because she was born with certain personality traits that make leadership easier, or in response to great crisis, or simply because she studied and applied leadership skills that are taught as part of the business management curriculum.

Management experts suggest that leaders are born *and* made. Some people have natural abilities, such as good communications skills, imagination, and decisiveness. However, effective leadership entails such a wide variety of behaviors and skills across an extensive array of circumstances that no one person could possibly be born with all of the qualities necessary to serve in that capacity for all situations. So, strong leadership necessarily involves some degree of acquired learning—in most cases, a very significant degree.

Great leaders are individuals who intentionally and willfully do the right thing. No matter the personal cost. No matter the consequences. They live by values that have deep meaning, values that define and shape their actions, and which express their character to the world.

For George Washington, the price of doing what he knew to be right could not have been higher. He pledged and exhausted much of his personal fortune in the fight to secure freedom from Great Britain. Orders from the Crown about what was to be done should he be captured in battle (“...to be summarily hung from the highest tree in the area, the body to remain on display at the end of the rope for no less than three days...”), left no doubt as to how he would pay for the courage of his convictions.

Washington was arguably the greatest visionary leader in American political history. He was able, amidst almost unimaginable difficulties, to maintain coherence between his long-range goals for a free and democratic nation, and his short-term actions as he led the fight for independence day by day.

In Abraham Lincoln, we may have the single greatest example of political and moral leadership our nation has ever known. He understood all too well that the chaos of the War Between the States was too great for smallness on his part. Lincoln was forced to look beyond the causes and consequences of mere victory and defeat, beyond grief and vengeance, toward understanding, forgiveness, healing, and hope. As in the cases of other great leaders, Lincoln had no instruction books to follow: he walked a path which none before him had traveled.

In her brilliant book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin points out Lincoln's revolutionary leadership tactics. For his cabinet (the most unusual in U.S. history, according to Goodwin) Lincoln chose men who had openly criticized him, men who had badly wanted the presidency themselves but had lost to him. Asked how he could appoint such individuals to work so closely with him, Lincoln replied, "These are among the strongest men in the nation; I cannot deprive the nation of their strengths."



Besides being able to recognize peoples' abilities and strengths, Lincoln had an extraordinary ability to reach into their hearts, and to communicate that he understood what it was like to walk in their shoes. He did not turn his back on his humble ancestry; he always identified himself as a common man. He shared credit for success, saying, "The path to success is wide enough for two to walk abreast."

Lincoln also accepted blame for his failures and mistakes—something we don't often see with contemporary politicians, and he learned from those mistakes. Recognizing the strengths of others, sharing credit, and accepting responsibility are all qualities that take courage—perhaps that is why we are so surprised when we come across a leader who actually possesses these qualities.

Courage is a word that also applied to Martin Luther King, Jr. King believed that the future belonged to the brave, not to the faint of heart. He learned that real leadership is not forged through the occasional 'big event' appearance, but in a day-to-day application of the principles of conscience learned over a lifetime. It was to conscience, not consensus, that King adhered. (Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously declared consensus to be "simply the absence of leadership.") What others believed or wanted or pressured him to undertake took a distant second place to doing what he believed, what he knew, was right. In that stand, King marked himself not simply a leader, but a great leader. His beliefs were built upon a foundation of faith, experience, hope and insight. To express those beliefs was a daily exercise in risk; not just risk of losing his life, which is a danger most great leaders face, but risk of ridicule, the risk of the loss of political and financial support, and the risk of losing the respect of friends and family members.

The rarest kind of leaders are those few, who by following, actually achieve greatness. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a wonderful example of a transformational kind of leadership. This tiny Albanian nun had no money, no spiritual or temporal title or authority, not even a single donor when she began her works among the poorest of India's poor. What she did possess was the extraordinary gift of being able to capture and communicate her vision with such eloquence and passion that she ignited a generation to join her in service. Mother Teresa inspired all around her to transcend their own self-interests; she led by following, carrying in her hands not a checkbook, but a bedpan.

Fueled only by her faith, determination and absolute certainty of purpose, she built the Missionaries of Charity into a worldwide organization with 4,500 nuns and 100,000 volunteers working in almost 600 homes in 126 countries. She led by example, rather than having a conscious plan of leading. Mother Teresa paid no attention to her leadership style; she was always focused on serving 'the wretched of the earth'— and she created her organizations solely for that purpose. She had no interest in leading, only in serving God.

Once, a novice Sister who had just begun working with Mother Teresa happened upon a filthy toilet that was overflowing onto the floor. The novice was so disgusted at the sight that she hid in a closet, peeking out the door only to see when she could make her escape. At about that same moment, 82-year old Mother Teresa came bustling down the corridor. At a glance (and a whiff) she sized up the situation. Without hesitation, she rolled up her sleeves,

grabbed a mop and bucket and quickly cleaned the toilet and floor, and then went on with her business. The young nun saw, close up, what leadership really looks like. Mother Teresa did not know that someone was watching her, but it would not have mattered. No surprise that one of the world's most humble leaders often said, *"Do not wait for leaders; do what must be done, person to person."*

We know the stories of these renowned leaders who intentionally did the right thing, even in the face of great peril, and we take care to see that our children learn them, too. From Washington risking his fortune for a revolution, to Lincoln at war with his fellow Americans (and creating his "team of rivals" because they were the best folks to deal with the issues of the day), and Dr. King leaving the comfort of his church to pass his dream on to future generations, to Mother Teresa's life in service to others. The fact is, they all "had a dream" - and they all took the hard steps it took to make those dreams into reality, inspiring others as they went through their lives.

But, it is not simply to the great figures of history that we should turn to see leadership, values and character exemplified. Their stories are illuminating and uplifting, to be sure, but in their celebrity they are also distant and somewhat mythical, more like statues of demigods on marble pedestals than approachable humans in whose company we can feel comfortable.

In fact, there are far more familiar leaders in our lives, ordinary men and women whose lives play out on a more human scale, and from whose examples we can learn important lessons in leadership, character and values in action. They are all around us, though their numbers are declining at an increasingly rapid rate. Who are these literally 'unsung' leaders? They are the men and women who six decades ago left the comfort of home and school and family to fight on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific. If ever a generation of Americans provided leadership by doing what was right over what was expedient or profitable or safe, it is the generation that won WW II.

It has become fashionable of late to celebrate the sacrifice and courage of this generation of warriors and builders. Books, movies and television programs have poured forth in the past few years trumpeting the accomplishments of this greatest of generations. That is as it should be. We should celebrate the quiet, determined resolve with which our parents and grandparents went to war to preserve the freedoms we hold dear. And we should also celebrate the torrent of energy and optimism they applied when they came home from war, and with which they set about to

build the greatest and most generous nation in the world.

What a journey these 'ordinary' leaders have traveled! Think about an 18-year old infantry soldier, speeding towards the beaches of Normandy in a wooden-walled landing craft just after dawn on June 6, 1944. The boat weaves to avoid heavy machine gun fire from the shore, waves crash over the bow, and explosions, mayhem and chaos overwhelm his senses. Within minutes, most of the buddies who joined him in this first wave of attacks lie dead or wounded along the surf line. And in the hours, days and weeks ahead, he will be tested almost beyond



the limits of human endurance. From what reservoir of faith and hope and determination did he draw to not merely survive the battle, but to triumph? And how did the lessons this young soldier learned on the battlefield sustain him when he returned home in 1945?

Those are vital questions. Millions of young American men and women, without thought of their own mortality, fought and struggled and sacrificed mightily in ways we can only imagine. And for many, the contrast between the 'whatever it takes' spirit of our parents and grandparents and that of all too many 'hey, don't bother me, my life is comfortable and cozy' people today, is as stark as it is worrisome. The best hope for our nation today, and for the future may well lie in the answer to the simple question "how did you do it, granddad?"

But, according to recent studies we are not doing the asking. The WW II generation is not a chatty one; theirs is an ethos marked by humility and unselfishness. Braggarts and self-indulgents they are not. You will not find them selling their stories to the tabloids, or asking special favors for doing what they felt was simply their duty.

Sadly, few children or grandchildren take the time to ask grandmother or grandfather to share the stories, and almost none ask the deeper questions about the meaning of the experiences. Time is not on the side of those of us who believe that capturing and sharing those stories is critical: veterans of WW II are dying at the rate of over 1,000 per day. And as they pass, countless stories of values and character, of experience and determination, hope and endurance, are lost. Forever.

*Leaders risk what they hold dear in order
to achieve what they hold important.*

As individuals, families, communities and as a nation, we are all denied access to the greatest gifts imaginable when these stories are not intentionally passed to us. What our parents and grandparents have to offer by consciously telling the stories of their lives goes far beyond the usual 'payoffs' we associate with great storytelling. In their life stories lie lessons that should not be allowed to fade away into the mist. They are replete with character, values, and leadership. Yes, we can see these attributes on display through the lives of such luminaries as Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa, but only from a distance, and only as observers. The plain truth is, what we learn about their lives is obscured by layers of myth, academic revisionism, and political correctness.

We do not have to gaze skyward at soaring monuments that honor presidents or kings or saints to understand why character is so important. We do not have to buy today's bestselling business management book to appreciate the meaning of leadership. Nor is a house of worship the best place to learn about the role of values in our lives. We don't have to do these things because the teachers from whom we can most benefit are still with us. For a short while, at least.

They are our fathers and mothers, our grandparents, aunts and uncles. Their life stories are imbued with important lessons, and the sooner we realize that the gift and the responsibility for intentionally sharing those stories is the last, great duty for which they must be called, the more we shall all benefit for having asked the questions.

If, however, we do not learn about, share and intentionally pass to our own children the values and strength of character of 'the greatest generation ever,' I believe that we may ultimately lose everything for which they sacrificed. The consequence of such a loss is almost beyond description: our institutions of freedom, even the future of our nation, could well hang in the balance.

It is a given that the great leaders of history risked what they held most dear in order to achieve what they held most important. But then, so did the ordinary seamen, cooks, carpenters and laborers who answered Shackleton's ad in 1890, and soon found themselves in the middle of an extraordinary and dangerous adventure.

So did mom and dad, and grandfather and grandmother. In time, we may be called upon to do the same. Should that time come, how much better prepared we will be to face our own trials and triumph over our own adversaries, if the lessons learned from our fathers and mothers are there to guide us.



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