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Commentary

Christopher H. Johnson

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COMMENTARY

REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP

Christopher H. Johnson

Leadership—this word has such a rich meaning. Yet in this the twenty-first century, does anyone fully appreciate it? Are we a nation that still honors leadership's inherent value to our society? Do we still strive to embody its principles in everyday life, or are we a nation—with perhaps even a military—that truly does not understand the meaning of the word? Have we, as a result, begun to embrace management as the new ideal?

I have been observing both leaders and managers for over forty years, during my Navy career, my time in the private sector, in church, and in several nonprofit endeavors. This is a summary of what I have learned.

LEADERSHIP VERSUS MANAGEMENT

Management is the science of creating and controlling a successful organization. It drives an organization into a groove of tried-and-true methodologies that make it orderly, lean, efficient, stable, mechanically correct, fiscally disciplined, highly

analytic, well behaved, and productive. Management seeks success through implementation of disciplined habits, repeatable processes, and analytic decisions. Management is the organized pursuit of everyday achievements and success.

Leadership, on the other hand, looks beyond the everyday. It is the art of igniting an organization to achieve something new, different, and sometimes radical. Leadership is about understanding how, when, and where to break out of the comfort (and the shackles) of the management

Chris Johnson retired as a captain from the U.S. Navy, where he served as commissioning navigator in USS New Jersey (BB 62) and commanded USS Vandegrift (FFG 48). He was also program manager and deputy office director at the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency. Upon his retirement Captain Johnson worked as an independent research and development leader, a systems engineer, and in marketing for Northrop Grumman. He is a frequent contributor to professional journals and was the winner of the U.S. Naval Institute's 2003 general essay contest.

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groove and be bold, responsive, innovative, and even revolutionary. Leadership encourages individuals to attack problems rather than just manage them, to seek breakthroughs and pursue blockbuster ideas, to challenge limits and leap over obstacles, to embrace risk and change, and to grasp victory at critical moments against all odds.

A leader is one who practices good management but simultaneously feels a constant compulsion to pursue something extraordinary. A leader is one who has wisdom and sense of timing to know when the moment is right to break out of that management groove and strike down a new path, someone who has nurtured within the inherent vision, courage, selflessness, humility, and fortitude to pursue that path to an extraordinary and often game-changing conclusion.

Management and leadership may sound like kindred concepts, but they are in fact radically different approaches to solving problems and moving forward. Management creates competence and then rides that competence to success. Leadership pursues greatness. Leaders frequently emerge during life's most perilous moments when managers have already thrown up their hands in despair of finding a reliable and safe solution.

How do leaders enable greatness? By doing what managers are taught not to do. Leaders are ceaseless and daring in the pursuit of progress. They are willing to be inventive and unconventional, to trust their intuition and take risks, to embrace innovation, to follow dreams and visions, and to stand tall in the most difficult circumstances. Leaders persistently challenge organizational resistance, regimentation, and inertia. They put thought into action more passionately and effectively, with a much richer feel for teamwork, and with a deep sense of obligation to their subordinates.

In practice, of course, the world earnestly needs both managers and leaders. However, it is critical to understand that when, in extraordinary circumstances, change is absolutely necessary, and we need people who *can* be in charge, then we are looking for leaders.

In 1776, George Washington's Continental Army was driven out of New York and almost captured. The fledgling American Revolution was on the verge of collapse. This army, though hounded by British troops on its trek through New Jersey, eventually escaped to northeastern Pennsylvania, where it moved into winter camp, presumably to rearm, resupply, lick its wounds, and prepare for re-engagement in the spring. We might call that a management-driven approach—steady, sure, and logical. However, Washington had a bolder plan. He led his army across the Delaware River in small boats on Christmas Day, surprising the British, winning an improbable victory, and capturing muskets, powder, artillery, and a thousand prisoners. He reestablished the Americans as a fighting force with

which to be reckoned, and he ignited his army to a great achievement that made an imprint on history. George Washington was a leader.

Being a leader does not always imply initiatives as dramatic or historic as Washington's crossing of the Delaware. Even small, everyday departures from the norm can be extraordinary, for they drive us toward progress, new thinking, and renewal. That is the effect we expect from leadership.

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

For over two hundred years leadership has been a unique hallmark of American culture and arguably a significant component of its success. From the Founding Fathers and pioneers forward, leaders have consistently thrust our nation into new endeavors and advances. From Washington to President Harry Truman, from the purchase of Alaska to landing a man on the moon, from inventing the lightbulb to developing the personal computer, leaders have consistently challenged and bypassed conventional thinking. In significant ways, America has always embraced the vitality and vision inherent in good leadership.

Yet leadership can also lead to failure. The willingness to take a risk can also be an invitation to fail. Failure, however, is often the route to greatness. Edison failed thousands of times before he found the right way to build a lightbulb.¹

However, today something is afoot that is gnawing at the fabric of that leadership, and we need to defend against it. Many, for example, consider a master's degree in business-style management the new form of leadership, because it is so analytic and risk averse. These people often regard a leader simply as an exceptional manager with an extra dollop of energy and a magnetic personality. Others believe that success, or wealth, or a fashionable position is the key to leadership, thus encouraging such people as celebrities, sports heroes, lawyers, politicians, etc., into positions of leadership. While yet others are so anxious to avoid missteps in their careers that they never dare to follow a course of greatness. The result is a growing unwillingness and inability to move forward, take risks, or courageously solve vexing problems.

Regrettably, I find many senior military officers and business executives to be examples of this. They often have all the trappings of leaders but they have rarely taken risks, perpetually toe the party line, and rarely break out of their shells to make a real difference. These impostors serve to confuse and misdirect us and could possibly pose a real threat to our great nation and our military if we allow such management types to become our models of leadership. If we had allowed this to happen in 1776, there might never have been a United States. We seem to be awash in problems but bereft of bold solutions. We search for leaders but find few. Where are they? Possibly they too are lost in the misperception of what leadership is.

LEADERSHIP AT ITS ESSENCE

What I have learned from my observations is that leadership has nothing to do with how people express themselves or how much they know. The world is full of intellects and showmen who cannot lead because they are too busy analyzing, theorizing, preening for the camera, or wringing their hands about what to do next. No, neither intelligence, education, eloquence, nor past position is an indication of leadership.

Rather, character is the heart of leadership. For that reason, the only true way to describe leadership focuses not on how leaders are educated or the processes or checklists they must follow (for that's how managers would try to describe the process of leadership), but on the qualities of character that leaders embrace. While a manager can be taught in the classroom, a true leader is molded by not only education but real-life experience.

There may be many interpretations of the quality set that drives a true leader, but here are what I have observed to be the key elements.

Passion. Leadership is rooted in a persistent passion, which in this context implies an irresistible commitment of body and soul to a forward-leaning purpose, to change, and to progress. It is a constant, constructive discontent with the status quo. Every leader I have ever known has it. It is not an outward, emotionalized, frenzied passion worn on the sleeve but an inner fire that only occasionally bursts through a cool and composed exterior. Where there is a real leader, I will show you passion.

This passion often contains elements of nobility and rebellion. It is noble because it encompasses the ability and willingness to sense right from wrong, selfless from selfish, good from bad, and to make consistently good choices between them.

Leaders are also rebels. There is a spirit within a leader that remains undaunted by criticism. A leader is often compelled to speak bluntly and is willing to disregard both regulations and conventional thinking. Often progress comes more in breaking rules than abiding by them. Joe Rochefort was Admiral Chester Nimitz's lead cryptologist prior to the battle of Midway. He broke many rules and willingly angered many superiors in Washington, but his passion for breaking the Japanese naval code led to a startling American victory at Midway and permanently reversed Allied fortunes in the Pacific theater in World War II.² Thomas Edison said, "Restlessness is discontent, and discontent is the first necessity of progress. Show me a thoroughly satisfied man, and I will show you a failure."³

Curiosity. Leaders are perpetually curious. As salesmen are taught to look quickly around the offices of people on whom they call to understand and form a better bond with them, so a leader must constantly learn more about the organization

he or she leads. In this regard, a leader's best friend is a great question—a question that is asked over and over until a meaningful insight surfaces. Answers, or even the absence of an answer, gives a leader the basis for an intimate understanding of the organization.

Leaders eventually learn that they cannot gain real clarity simply by taking briefs and reports from subordinates. They must walk around, engage people, ask questions, and feel the inner workings of the organization. Even the best-intentioned subordinate rarely sees or senses things through the same lens as the person in charge. Leadership is often based on perception and intuition. Leaders look for and sense the things that briefs will not reveal, such as an unhappy employee, a system that does not quite work, a bullheaded supervisor, or a brilliant but underperforming team member.

Curiosity truly educates a leader's perspective, and it supports two essential visions—one, a sense of how to move forward, and two, a peripheral vision that alerts a leader to the surprises that lurk around the corner. Surprise is a leader's greatest enemy, and curiosity can be the greatest resource.

Albert Einstein said, "I have no special talent—I am only passionately curious."⁴ Walt Disney explains, "There's really no secret about our approach. We keep moving forward—opening new doors and doing new things—because we are curious. And curiosity keeps leading us down new paths. We're always exploring."⁵

Vision. Vision is often spoken of as some mystical ability to see the future and respond accordingly. Presidents are often praised when they are perceived to have it and vilified when they are perceived to lack it. However, I find vision to be no magical mental capacity but a much simpler, everyday thing—the convergence of passion, curiosity, imagination, and perspective. Passion fuels the leader's compulsion for progress, curiosity digs out the places where progress is most important, imagination allows one to see new ways of proceeding. Therefore, vision is not an issue of genius or clairvoyance.

Consider the possibility that there are really no new ideas and no new visions that leaders personally must feel responsible for inventing. Something that poses as a new idea or new vision is often just a refocus or rearrangement of many old ideas, connected in different ways to produce a fresh solution to a problem. After all, the vision of a horse cart is merely a mental image of a container, an axle, two wheels, and a horse, all connected for the first time.

Vision is the result of a passionate, inquiring, open, and practical mind that permits itself to think without preconceived bounds or conventions. It requires setting aside quiet time every day to consider new combinations and permutations and to see new possibilities. It is something normal and natural that often just requires the willingness to reflect on what could be.

Willingness to Act. It is stunning to find people who apparently have the instincts of a leader but cannot or will not take action. For example, take General George B. McClellan, of American Civil War fame. He loved to train, he love to organize, he loved to plan. He simply was incapable of moving into combat. During the Peninsular Campaign (as the documentarian Ken Burns notes in his 1990 PBS series *The Civil War*), he earned the sobriquet “the Virginia Creeper” for his willingness to move forward only at the agonizingly slow pace of a well known Virginia ivy plant, while constantly finding reasons for avoiding any engagement with the Army of Northern Virginia.

In a once widely known pamphlet, *A Message to Garcia*, Elbert Hubbard recounted the story of a man named Rowan who was assigned to take an important message from President McKinley to General Calixto Garcia, the leader of Cuban insurgents, who was somewhere in the mountains of Cuba. The story recounts that Rowan took the message and delivered it. He did not ask where Garcia could be found, how he could be recognized, how to get to Cuba, how to survive there, how to get back, or what clothes to pack. He simply took the message from President McKinley and delivered it. With obvious admiration, Hubbard proclaimed, “There is a man whose form should be cast in deathless bronze and the statue placed in every college of the land. It is not book-learning young men need, nor instruction about this and that, but a stiffening of the vertebrae which will cause them to be loyal to a trust, to act promptly, concentrate their energies: do the thing—‘Carry a message to Garcia.’”⁶

Similarly, leaders cannot simply plan; they must act—when, how, and where they said they would. They must be decisive, even when there is insufficient information and analysis to decide properly; honor commitments; take direct charge when required in emergencies; and never allow fear to paralyze them or retard quick, effective, aggressive action. An essential part of a leader’s job is constantly to “take a message to Garcia”!

Sacred Bond with Subordinates. The relationship between leaders and their adherents goes far beyond that of managers and their employees. Leaders understand that they are under constant surveillance. These are the qualities that really command the trust and loyalty of subordinates:

- *A resolute spirit:* Subordinates constantly seek evidence of courage, resolve, unflagging optimism, and fortitude to assure them that their leader is truly committed to the vision at hand and will be at their side to the bitter end—win or lose.
- *Integrity:* Subordinates earnestly seek from a leader and an organization justice, caring, and respect. They seek a place where no one is above the law, where a subordinate’s welfare is a priority, and offenses are investigated and

dealt with fairly and openly. Subordinates respect leaders who are willing to bear the responsibility for their every action.

- *Truth*: Nothing is so corrosive to loyalty as someone using secrets and untruthful representations to gain favor. Regardless of how good or bad the news is, the leader's standard must be a full and honest account.
- *Balance and perspective*: A leader can be daring, but never rash or dogmatic, never willing to sacrifice subordinates needlessly or for mere glory. Subordinates seek constant assurance that leadership will act intelligently and thoughtfully, and will constantly find a way to win.
- *Humanity*: Subordinates want to know that a leader's decisions are based as much on their health and welfare, and those of their families, as on the completion of the task at hand. The leader must show them unbounded loyalty and respect. This allows subordinates to face difficult and dangerous, even deadly, circumstances with pride and dignity.

In addition to these qualities, I believe that every leader owns a unique personal quality that is somehow exemplary, that identifies and bonds him or her to the team. It can be humor, kindness, strength, honesty, empathy, intelligence, or any other trait, but in every case this quality is deep, enduring, and reassuring. Leaders take care to identify those singular qualities in themselves, and then lean on them, hone them, and let them shine.

Discussions on leadership often speak of eloquence and communication as crucial qualities for leaders. Communication rises above words, speeches, gestures, and superficial pep talks. It empowers the team to persevere in the toughest conditions.

Loyalty is crucial, but it can be easily faked when leaders do not measure up. Leaders see subordinates as treasured teammates or comrades in arms, while managers usually see them as mere employees. Which attitude prompts the greater loyalty in return? Which attitude cements that bond between leader and subordinate?

Commitment to Teamwork. Leaders lead people. They must remember that it is their team that really gets the job done. This points to a leader's real occupation—enabling, facilitating, and inspiring teamwork. Here is a key secret of leadership: once the value and purpose of teamwork are understood, a leader can lead almost any organization on earth, because success depends not on technical knowledge or masterful decision making but on shepherding teams effectively and then letting them do the work.

Adjusting or correcting the elements of teamwork is also, by far, the most expedient and effective way to improve an organization's performance. New equipment, detailed

training, and new facilities all cost money and take time to implement . . . but shifting team member roles, building confidence, opening new avenues of communication or sources of information can all be accomplished swiftly, and can invigorate a team's chemistry and ignite performance *overnight*. The Cincinnati Reds of Major League Baseball proved this in 1975 when, by moving Pete Rose from left field to third base and inserting George Foster in left field, they created the infamous Big Red Machine that won 108 games in 1975 and is to this day the last National League team to win consecutive World Series.⁷

Often, igniting a team can be very simple. A leader supports teamwork formally in five ways—by

- Listening to, observing, shepherding, and adjusting the team continuously
- Constantly removing obstacles to its progress, both internally and externally
- Pushing all team members to grow individually through delegating responsibilities to subordinates, allowing them to make key decisions, and building confidence in their decision-making abilities
- Encouraging and permitting the team to self-correct and self-inspire
- Holding team members accountable for their actions, not as punishment, but as a vehicle to heighten awareness that the team functions properly only when all do their jobs properly and efficiently.

In a very real way, teamwork underlies everything a leader accomplishes, and the constant development of the team is often the leader's most important job.

Humility. I find real leaders are perpetually intuitive. Leaders make decisions as much on instinct as they do on analysis, and the door to intuition and instinct is humility. By enforcing an inner quiet and a willingness to hear new ideas, leaders permit themselves to escape for a few moments from the amplified howl of analytic thought, dogma, preconceived notions, hardened positions, and the noise of educated opinion. This permits them to listen to quieter voices from their own team or within themselves.

When leaders send the message to their team that they know everything and have every answer, the proximate result is that everyone concerned stops bringing them new ideas, insights, inspirations, or warnings. The quickest way to be alone is to let your team know that you do not require its input.

Humility is a check against one's own voice, the door through which new inspirations enter, and a constant reminder that leadership is not about power and self-promotion but selfless pursuit of progress. It signals the leader when it is time to lead, when it is time to follow, and when it is time to compromise.

Perhaps Washington crossed the Delaware because he was more willing to listen to inspiration and intuition than to an educated evaluation of the probability

of success, and that required humility. Einstein reputedly said that “the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and forgotten the gift.”⁸

Leadership is often difficult; it runs counter to the more comfortable, and often more lucrative, path of management. A leader’s road is often strewn with obstacles. Leaders take risks, and sometimes those risks lead to failure. Leaders are sometimes viewed as misfits, troublemakers, and rebels. Often the reward for a job well done, for grasping victory from the jaws of defeat, is dismissal or a letter of reprimand. After the success at Midway, Rochefort was removed by his superiors in Washington and never served directly in a cryptanalysis billet again.⁹

Interestingly, the John Wayne style of being a leader—big talking and guns a-blazin’—hardly seems to be the model for the everyday practice of leadership. Rather than constantly being at the epicenter of the action, the leader is just as likely to be in the background, letting the team do the real work—staying calm, collected, and supportive, and letting the traits of his or her leadership character shine through and imparting confidence, wisdom, and (at the right moments) daring to subordinates.

In the same way, the daily practice of leadership is embodied not so much by the image of a knight leading men into battle from atop a white stallion, but by that of men and women working hard to make the team successful and victorious, by

- Constantly balancing leadership and management traits to fit the situation
- Being curious and passionate
- Shepherding, improving, testing, and preparing the team for success
- Living up to the occasional take-charge moment or crucial, real-time decision
- Confronting failure with courage and determination
- Consistently finding time to be quiet to listen to his or her inner voice for guidance.

Leaders walk this road of leadership because they are compelled to follow that inner fire that pushes them out of the groove to make a difference. Leaders take pride in being among those people who find the new way, pursue it, and never shy away from conflict, danger, and opportunity. Leadership leads us all to greatness.

Local and national problems abound; it is a daunting world. We are in desperate need of leaders to solve our problems, because managers will not. Thus there is an increasing urgency for us all to come to grips with the real nature

of leadership, to understand the place of management and of managers in the context of leadership, to recommit ourselves to the development and practice of leadership in ourselves and our subordinates, and to have the courage to promote and protect people who fail in the pursuit of greatness—for that failure often makes them stronger and makes them better leaders.

NOTES

1. See “Edison’s Lightbulb,” *Franklin Institute*, at www.fi.edu/.
2. Elliot Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2011), pp. 993–1029.
3. *QuotationsBook*, www.quotationsbook.com, s.v. “Thomas Alva Edison.”
4. *Einstein*, s.v. “Carl Seeling” (11 March 1952), einstein.biz/.
5. Michael Eisner, foreword to *Walt Disney Imagineering*, by Walt Disney Company (New York: Hyperion, 1998), p. 9.
6. Originally published as Elbert Hubbard, “A Message to Garcia,” *Philistine* (March 1899).
7. “Major League Baseball World Series History,” mlb.mlb.com/.
8. Widely attributed to Albert Einstein, although sources differ.
9. Carlson, *Joe Rochefort’s War*.