

Leadership

Many years ago, in a combat environment, I had the benefit of observing “good” and “bad” leadership. Many readers have, no doubt, also observed leadership in action and have formed opinions of their own about leadership. This paper is an outline of what I perceive to be true leadership as opposed to management. There is a difference, that becomes obvious during a crisis situation.

Leadership cannot be learned. It is a character trait that lies dormant until an emergency situation requires some “on your feet” decision making and prompt action. The true leader rises to the task. This is in contrast to a good manager, who operates on a daily basis to coordinate people, material, tools, and goals to achieve a well ordered organization. Both characteristics, leadership and management, can reside in the one and same person, who can quickly switch roles as needed. The manager is more an administrator, whose skills are much in demand and highly regarded. The manager is intelligent, has people skills, communication skills, can manage money and resources, can multitask, and knows how to work the system. The effective manager may have been appointed to that position, he/she may have inherited it, or rose to that level from education and just hard work. We can groom a person with proper dress, training, and credentials to guide a group of subordinates. Indeed, we can take a person off the street, pin bars on them, present them to a group, and say here is your boss. That works for management, but is not necessarily a good leader. That would be, what I would call, a ceremonial leader. He/she is appointed by authority, but is not a natural leader. What, then, are the characteristics of a good leader?

First, the leader has character. He/she has some ethics and morality that can command respect from others. The leader connects with, and has empathy for others. He/she can walk in the shoes of the common person, and may have even walked in those shoes before. The respect is earned long before the need arises for action.

Second, the leader is involved in the situation. He/she is part of the events that led up to the crisis situation and is connected with the group “on the spot”. The “leading” cannot be exercised remotely.

Third, the natural leader is rational. He/she can understand cause and effect. He/she responds to data, recognizes opinions as such, and ignores them. He/she has a systems mindset and processes connectivity. How are things connected? The relationship between events and people are able to be unraveled.

Fourth, the natural leader can foresee the future in what is possible. Being able to think outside the box is essential. He/she can strategize and translate vision into reality.

Fifth, the natural leader is resilient. He/she is able to assess the situation, diagnose faults, regroup, re-calibrate, and move on to a new direction on the fly. In other words, not be stuck in a mold.

Sixth, leadership is not a one person show. The leader needs to delegate and cultivate lieutenants who will be subordinate leaders.

In summary, good leadership is a characteristic that only emerges during a crisis situation. It cannot be learned, but is molded through exposure to adversity. It resides in an individual as dormant until needed.

The military services have abundant experience in what constitutes leadership. They promote those characteristics via historical examples of prominent persons and conflicts. They usually involve selfless devotion to the mission, to the flag (country), and to the people under command. The U. S. Air Force has an informal motivational adage of “lead, follow, or get out of the way”. This is designed to build teamwork, and the formation of a team is evidence of a good leader.