

Transforming Individuals and Organizations



The Secret to Good Leadership: Solving the Mystery...or Not?

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene. Two hours into my niece's recent wedding reception, my brother (and beaming father of the bride) beckons me off the dance floor. I finish my last spin move (much to the relief of my teenage kids) and pick my way through various clusters of celebrants to where my brother is standing with a male wedding guest.

"Deb," he says, "I'd like to introduce Joe (name changed to protect the innocent). He owns a mid-sized business and wanted to meet you. I've told him about the work you do." Joe and I shake hands as I rack my brain for an appropriate way to transition from the throbbing beats of Flo Rida's song "Low", which is playing in the background, to a potential business discussion. Maybe I shouldn't have had that cocktail?

Joe helps me. "So, you work with a lot of different leaders? Probably mostly big companies, right?"

"Actually, I've been fortunate to work with leaders of all kinds of organizations: small, mid-sized, Fortune 50...family owned, not-for-profit, publicly traded...lots of different industries and settings," I answer.

"Must be interesting work," he offers.

"Yes, it is. I love it!" I respond.

Gazing over his shoulder at the packed dance floor for a moment, my eyes linger on the action in momentary distraction. Then the million-dollar question arrives.

"What's the secret to leadership?" he asks earnestly.

My eyes snap back to his face, gauging the sincerity of his interest. He holds my gaze. And I realize...this isn't just idle chatter. This guy is serious.

And I lack a simple answer.

A Dance of a Different Kind.

I find myself wrestling with the awareness that I can't immediately produce a dazzling gift of well-packaged wisdom. "Secret to leadership?" I repeat. "Well, it kind of depends on what you mean by leadership, first of all. So, what do you mean?" (As a psychologist, I am allowed to answer a question with another question. It's a perk of the profession. It also buys me much-needed time.)

"Well, you know, what's the secret to good leadership? What do you see in all those different companies you work with?"

I define good leadership as *bringing forth the best in ourselves and others in pursuit of meaningful goals.*

Impressive sidestep of my return question but I want to honor his sincerity. I rifle through my mental rolodex of the best leaders with whom I've worked over the years and the practices that make them so. I think through my favorite leadership books, articles, blogs, and TED talks.

And still, I lack a simple answer.

I go on to explain to Joe that I define good leadership as *bringing forth the best in ourselves and others in pursuit of meaningful goals* (a definition I have handy at 9:00 on a Saturday night only because I've had to hone it while teaching "Foundation of Leadership" to inquisitive graduate students). And that I don't believe there is one fundamental secret to delivering it.

And then we move on to other topics.

Still Dancing. For the next couple of weeks, though, I found myself returning to his question. How might I answer it with more time to prepare (and less dance music in the background)?

How might you?

I have a few ideas of my own but I also thought I'd call in other experts. So I conducted a round of casual data gathering with some of my executive clients. After all, they are in the leadership trenches every day. What secrets do they have to divulge?

Expert Dance Moves.

"Hard work - that's the secret," said leader #1, before I even finish explaining the reason behind my question. "You have to be willing to work long and hard, to be knocked down, and to keep getting back up."

"Always keep in mind, it's not about you," and "It's not about you. It's about them...the people you are responsible for," came from leaders #2 and #3.

"Know the way, show the way and go the way," and "Good leaders have vision, passion and character," were quickly offered by leaders #4 and #5.

A cluster of responses, each from an additional executive leader, emphasized how a leader relates to those he/she is serving. From this vantage point, the secret to good leadership includes:

- "the ability to relate to and connect with your workforce...especially considering the global, diverse workforce of today";
- "empathy for the people you lead and the customers you serve";
- "listening...and then listening some more";
- "creating healthy relationships up, down and all around that are based on trust"; and
- "it starts by earning the trust of your team then proving to them you really care about them as a person...people will walk through walls for you if you are able to accomplish these first two 'steps'."

And one last offering: "Leadership is about being able to articulate the larger picture and higher purpose to our work. By linking that meaning to the day to day work of teams through personal engagement, real conversations and the building of direct and visible relationships, authentic affiliation can sustain and motivate our teams to be more than their potential."

All in all, some terrific answers from a highly experienced set of senior leaders (and you're only seeing select excerpts above!)

Yet no strong consensus around ONE secret to leadership.

My Solo. So what do I think? You weren't going to let me off the hook that easily, were you?

I stand by my belief that there isn't one fundamental secret that will solve the mysteries of good leadership. Leadership is an inherently complex concept with no one-size-fits-all template to follow, despite the thousands of leadership books that purport to deliver exactly that. I do believe there are essential qualities that contribute to good leadership: integrity, multiple intelligences (intellectual /"g" and emotional, among others), learning agility, resilience, forward thinking, and decisiveness are several.

But those qualities fall into the "necessary but not sufficient" category. And I'm not

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alone in this belief that no one secret to good leadership exists. As one of the responding leaders articulated in a preface to his answer to me: "This is a tricky one as I think the immediate answer is that it is not a secret! I do not know if you are looking for a sound bite or whether you want a few thoughts as I do not think a sound bite really captures it."

Well said. But fun to try?

An Unexpected Finding. As I read through my different clients' offerings several more times, I realized that in addition to capturing elements we could easily find in the core research on qualities of successful leaders, each leader's answer also captured something else...something unexpected.

For the most part, *each answer* reflected a viewpoint that was representative of, and even distinctive about, that individual leader's unique leadership journey - key life events that had shaped his beliefs, values internalized from important others and then tested in real life, and/or the deep sense of purpose she used to guide daily leadership actions.

Observable even in a sound bite.

Stated another way, if you had gathered all their answers, stripped the authors' names

off of them, and asked me to guess who had contributed each one, I bet I could have gotten pretty close to a perfect score...which is not, by the way, a tribute to me. Rather, it's a tribute to how much alignment I see between the "core self" of each leader I asked to contribute to this article and the leadership each of them strive to provide.

Hmm (otherwise known as the sound of thoughtful absorption). Wait a minute - is this a finding of an entirely different kind?

Closing Steps. So, is at least *one secret* to good leadership that we must strive to both provide the leadership that those who follow us need while also finding the ways to be most uniquely and powerfully ourselves? In other words, must each of us who aspire to be a good leader find our own "best" way to demonstrate it, informed and guided by the unique blend of personality traits, life experiences, values and beliefs that we hold most dear?

Is my fullest expression of who I am able to be as a good leader inherently unique to me and yours to you, although we may have some factors in common?

Hmm (more thoughtful absorption)...

I would love to hear from you who read this article. What do you think?



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