

Leadership: Can You Become a Good Leader?

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There is a plethora of books, seminars, and workshops available about leadership and what makes a good leader and many, no doubt, have made some authors very wealthy. I don't pretend to know all of the things that go into good leadership, but what I do know about leadership is that it embodies an individual's skill set and style. Style is perhaps influenced more by our personality (who doesn't know about the Myers-Briggs assessment?), but skills can be learned. Only a very small number of people, if any at all, are "born" leaders. Most of us have to develop the necessary skills and good judgment over time to become good, effective leaders. **Will Rogers** said, "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment." Good leaders have, among other things, good judgment, but most probably developed that trait by "trial and error." APS has long been concerned with identifying potential society leaders early in their careers and providing them with opportunities to hone their skills. The recently created Learning Institute within the society is a good example, as are the many opportunities graduate students and early career professionals have to participate in numerous APS committees and activities. The APS Foundation also has several funds that help assist with that process. I have had the honor and privilege of being in leadership roles within my universities, professional societies, and civic and community organizations and each has taught me valuable lessons. Some of those lessons were hard earned.

Leadership skills grow with experience. The College of Agriculture at Purdue University has an undergraduate leadership development certificate program that offers highly qualified and motivated students an opportunity to participate in a two-year program packed with academic, extracurricular, and community service requirements. When completed, students receive a leadership certificate that is amended to their diplomas. I had the pleasure of serving as a mentor for several of these students. As part of my initial interview with them, I asked them to jot down as many skills and attributes they thought good leaders possessed and which ones they thought they had. They listed many of the common traits: visionary, critical thinker, competent, trustworthy, multitasker, etc., and after some

discussion and prodding, we had a combined list of more than 30 items. However, each thought they only had a couple of those traits and skills and wanted to develop more. This is the crux of good leadership—developing the critical skills you don't have and improving upon the ones you do have. And that takes time and it takes making mistakes along the way. But, at the same time, one needs to be a quick learner and not repeat the same mistakes. There are many quotable quotes about leadership, but one I like is, "experience is what enables us to recognize a mistake when we make it again." A critical attribute common among good leaders is that they are not afraid to make mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn. This is a must and it comes from having confidence in yourself, your vision, and your team, be it an academic unit, company, or professional society. Those who never make mistakes don't do very much. Having said that, however, good leaders openly admit mistakes, accept responsibility, and do not pass blame onto others, all the while striving to attain additional information to modify and improve their decisions.

If leadership could be summed up in one sentence it might be that leadership is about having a clear vision and empowering others to help achieve that vision. Leadership is about team building and inspiring people to take ownership and pride, while pursuing the bigger vision. Good leaders recognize each individual's skills and assemble team members that complement each other. Leadership is not about how much credit you get but encouraging and recognizing those who help make it happen. Good leaders freely and frequently recognize and reward those they lead.

Good leaders see the big picture but understand they cannot do it all. They learn to delegate responsibility. This not only spreads out the workload, but helps instill a sense of ownership in the project and allows the leader to focus more on the leading rather than on the doing. Many of us, however, do not delegate well. Too often we use the excuse "it's easier if I just do it myself." While this sometimes may be the case, it typically is not good leadership. Good leaders have many things on their plate, and time management is crucial to getting projects completed. Delegation of responsibilities helps, but it

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is not the end all. A mistake often made by leaders is that they spend much of their time doing the easy stuff, while putting off the difficult stuff. This is akin to "stomping ants and letting the elephants run wild!" Good leaders accept the challenges of the difficult stuff and roll their sleeves up to get them done—on time and on budget.

Perhaps the hardest thing to grasp about leadership is strategic planning. Most of us are all too familiar with the chore of developing strategic plans. At least we think we are. Most universities, companies, and organizations require their units to develop five-year strategic plans, a task many people find both difficult and useless. But it should not be either one. A well-conceived strategic plan provides a road map to where you want to go, but before you make the road map, you need to know where it is you want to be! This comes from vision. Good leaders have vision. Vision is about knowing where you want the unit to be, what you want them to accomplish, or how you want others to perceive you. To paraphrase a scene from **Lewis Carroll's** *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, if you don't know where you want to be, then it doesn't matter which way you go.

A strategic plan begins with a shared vision and an understanding of what it will take to make that vision a reality. This requires anticipating challenges and obstacles likely to be encountered, as well as recognizing and seizing opportunities. It also entails a reasonable expectation of resources needed, both capital and human, as well as the support of higher administration. Few things get done if the big bosses don't concur! Thus the vision needs to be shared by both the unit and those above the unit. The road map then becomes a plan that gets you to your vision and one that others can follow. There needs to be consensus and the belief that a "rising tide floats all boats." If the unit gets better, everyone gets better by default.

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