

What is Leadership?

A Thought Paper

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"Be solid and well-rounded"



Leadership is not a person.

It is not a system, a method, or even a philosophy.

It is a struggle.

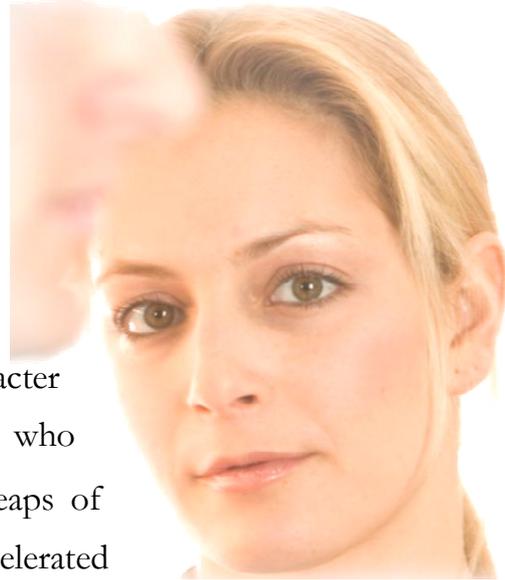
It is a challenge –

**a challenge by which the best in us becomes
the best from us.**

Leadership is *occurring* whenever an individual, a group, an organization, a community or even a nation rises to the level where their best is on display. Their best efforts. Their best thinking. Their best products and services. Their best heart and soul. It is not simple motivation, for motivation alone will not produce excellence. It is not skills alone, for a skilled but uninspired person produces mediocrity. It is not experience, for experience alone is just a memorized history lesson. Leadership is the process by which maximum potential equals maximum outcome.

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But that is not all that leadership is about. Leadership is about character. Character is built over a lifetime. Because character development is a lifelong journey, we can be intentional in molding it in developing leaders. Those without strong character are easily found. A leader without character cannot be trusted. How can a leader who cannot be trusted ask people to make leaps of faith during periods of uncertainty or accelerated change? How does a person whose word is suspect expect to have credibility with those who follow him? How can a leader whose followers openly question her possibly mentor them? The bottom line is this: a leader without character will ultimately not be followed.



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Followers observe leaders carefully. While it is impossible to measure a leader's heart, we can observe her choices and actions. Character is ultimately determined by the choices and pursuant actions a person makes. People then make judgments about her character based on what is seen, not what they want to believe about them. Because followers ultimately choose the quantity and quality of what they want give, they hold the power in the leadership equation. More so than any other factor, the character of the leader influences what followers contribute.

Character alone is not enough; a leader must be competent as well. She must possess the enabling skills required to be effective in her professional discipline, the skill to manage others and, ultimately, the acumen to keep the organization afloat. Management is not leadership. Management is a subset of leadership -- the enabling skills that make individuals and organizations more efficient.

Yes, management and its set of enabling skills are core, but not the core.

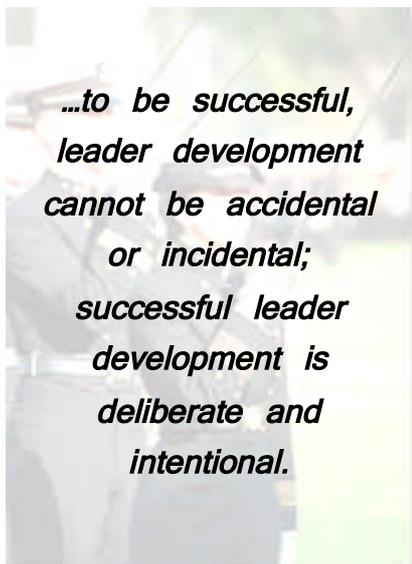


Management makes the "back office" work better. Time efficiency is not time effectiveness. Cost management is not a strategy. Well written lesson plans alone do not produce well educated children. Management and management skills enable leadership, but do not substitute for leadership. Without great skills it becomes almost impossible to make the best in people become the best from them. Just as it

takes thousands and thousands of engineers and technicians to manage the process that makes the space shuttle leave the ground, it takes vision and leadership to ever decide to go at all. Yes, management and its set of enabling skills are core, but not the core. Those who develop these skills and call it leadership simply miss the point.

So who is a leader? The reality is, leadership is a process. It is a process whose input is the best in you and the output is the best from you. Anyone who is working in this process, regardless of position or sphere of influence is by definition a leader. So the inevitable question: is a leader born or made? Johnson and Harper, authors of the book "Becoming a Leader the Annapolis Way" say this:

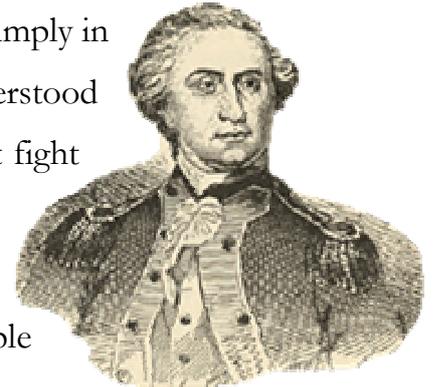
At (The Naval Academy) we have learned that to be successful, leader development cannot be accidental or incidental; successful leader development is deliberate and intentional. We understand that leadership is complicated, but we are unabashed in our assertion that we create leaders. Excellent leadership does not come easily to most.



Sometimes painful, it requires profound effort and commitment ... Leadership is not the result of good genes, good luck, or divine intervention (though we suppose any of these factors might help). Yes, IQ and leader-oriented personality traits help make leading easier. But these are not enough. Leadership confidence requires training, modeling and frequent experience "trying on" or practicing the

various skills inculcated in class, in readings, and in lectures. We see our share of "natural" leaders come through the gates at Annapolis, but even this fortunate minority requires direction; their inherent leader skills require honing and polishing.¹

Ultimately, leadership is about people. From day one at Annapolis, Midshipmen memorize the words of John Paul Jones: "Men mean more than guns in the rating of a ship." He knew that the ship was simply in the vehicle, the tool toward ultimate success. He understood that a well-trained, inspired crew could outmaneuver, out fight any foe. Therefore, it is with great hope and excitement that we should develop leaders in organizations. Leadership unlocks possibilities. Leadership takes people places they can't imagine they could go. Leadership is about giving people worth -- because there is nothing more worthy than achieving one's best.



ⁱ *Becoming a Leader the Annapolis Way*, Johnson and Harper, page 13.