

Somewhere Between Born and Made: Where Good Leaders Come From

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Sid Heal sent this very insightful piece on leadership and its development for me to share with those who frequent this Blog. It was written back in August 2009 By GEN. TONY ZINNI and TONY KOLTZ. great insights on the age old questions are leaders born, made...or something in between?

Where good leaders come from.

GEN. TONY ZINNI was commander-in-chief of CENTCOM and special U.S. envoy to the Middle East. TONY KOLTZ co-authored Tom Clancy's Into the Storm and Battle Ready. Adapted from Leading the Charge: Leadership Lessons From the Battlefield to the Boardroom and reprinted by permission of Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Ltd. Copyright ©2009 by the authors.

In my thirty-nine years of service in the Marine Corps, I have led and been led in desperate combat, in tough and complicated crises, and in a wealth of other highly charged and difficult situations. I have known true leadership when its absence would have been catastrophic. I have taught leadership courses and, after retirement, consulted and lectured on leader development for businesses and other organizations. And I have personally witnessed many world leaders work through difficult decisions in war and in conflict resolution.

"What is leadership?" I've asked myself again and again. "What must a person do to become a true leader or to turn others into true leaders?"

Does knowing leadership personally, reflecting on it intellectually, and experiencing it intimately make leadership easy to understand? No.

I'm hardly alone in knowing true leadership when I see it. And I'm not alone in having experienced bad leadership. All of us have seen both good and bad and have a pretty clear idea why and how it went good or bad. Yet we still struggle to understand what we ourselves need to do in order to become good leaders or to turn others into good leaders. Future leaders, like the young Marines and university students I have taught, are searching for clear-cut rules and prescriptions for good leadership and for definitive processes that will make them good leaders.

How are leaders made? What makes a truly superb leader? Can we predict who will become one? Can we develop programs to recruit, educate, and train reasonably talented people and build them into future leaders? Or are leaders born and not made, and does leadership simply come naturally to some and not to others?

These were big questions at the beginning of the twentieth century. After most of the world had rejected the concept that leadership passed by noble blood from father to son—or, more rarely, to daughter—people now had to choose leaders and be in the business of making them. During the last century, thousands of theories were brought forth and promoted as answering the leadership question. I have read countless analyses of great leaders and their common qualities, all trying to answer this question.

For many years, it was thought that the essential nature of leadership could be determined scientifically and that this knowledge could be translated into programs for selecting and training

leaders, just as we have programs to select and train pilots or doctors. The lives of superior leaders were studied and dissected to discover those special qualities that made them great; programs were developed to transfer these qualities over to those expected to become future leaders. You'd put the raw human material into one end of the leader-making machine, and the process of character building and education would produce leaders. It was like Star Trek teleporters, but with a bonus: You come out better than you go in.

In the Marine Corps, as in the other U.S. military services, this approach took a somewhat different form. Since the military services obviously want to build a strong, positive character in each of their leaders, we were taught that the process of building an ideal leader first requires building an ideal person. As an aspiring Marine officer, I was exposed to long lists of personal qualities, ideal traits, and guiding principles that I was expected to develop and master. Quality leadership was reduced to a scientifically determined foundation of eleven principles and fourteen traits.

The principles were:

- 1. Know yourself and seek self-improvement.**
- 2. Be technically and tactically proficient.**
- 3. Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates.**
- 4. Make sound and timely decisions.**
- 5. Set the example.**
- 6. Know your Marines and look out for their welfare.**
- 7. Keep your Marines informed.**
- 8. Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.**
- 9. Ensure assigned tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished.**
- 10. Train your Marines as a team.**
- 11. Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities.**

The traits were:

- 1. Dependability.** The certainty of proper performance of duty.
- 2. Bearing.** Creating a favorable impression in carriage, appearance, and personal conduct at all times.
- 3. Courage.** The mental quality that recognizes fear of danger or criticism, but enables a man to proceed in the face of it with calmness and firmness.
- 4. Decisiveness.** Ability to make decisions promptly and to announce them in a clear forceful manner.
- 5. Endurance.** The mental and physical stamina measured by the ability to withstand pain, fatigue, stress, and hardship.
- 6. Enthusiasm.** The display of sincere interest and exuberance in the performance of duty
- 7. Initiative.** Taking action in the absence of orders.
- 8. Integrity.** Uprightness of character and soundness of moral principles; includes the qualities of truthfulness and honesty.
- 9. Judgment.** The ability to weigh facts and possible solutions on which to base sound judgments.
- 10. Justice.** Giving reward and punishment according to the merits of the case. The ability to administer a system of rewards and punishments impartially and consistently.
- 11. Knowledge.** Understanding of a science or an art. The range of one's information, including professional knowledge and an understanding of your Marines.
- 12. Tact.** The ability to deal with others without creating offense.

13. **Unselfishness.** Avoidance of providing for one's own comfort and personal advancement at the expense of others.

14. **Loyalty.** The quality of faithfulness to country, the Corps, the unit, to one's seniors, subordinates, and peers.

These principles and traits were printed on cards that we carried everywhere and memorized. If we mastered the principles and developed the traits, we would, in theory, be on our way to becoming the superb leaders the Corps wanted. We were tested and given assignments in order to visibly demonstrate these traits and principles. The Corps' fitness reports at every stage of our careers were structured to assess how well we demonstrated the traits and practiced the principles in leading our Marines. This evaluation played a large part in determining whether we were given greater responsibilities and promoted. I can remember countless counseling sessions by senior officers reviewing my fitness reports and assessing how well I exhibited, or didn't exhibit, those desired principles and traits. Blocks were checked in descending order assessing how well we demonstrated these principles and traits: outstanding, excellent, above average, average, below average, and unsatisfactory. I was told of my strengths and my weaknesses, and how to improve. I was judged as an individual according to how well I was perceived to have succeeded or failed to achieve mastery of the traits and principles.

Good Person, Good Leader?

As with most leader-development programs with origins in the early twentieth century, our system was based on learning how to become a perfect individual, then demonstrating that in leadership assignments. Build good character, and you build a good leader.

In most leadership books written today by prominent leaders, academics, or self-help gurus, we see similar lists of qualities or principles. The secret to success lies in following the author's "Seven Ls of Leadership" or "Five Pillars of Successful Leadership."

It would be hard to argue with the theory. But something is missing.

Long ago, I read an exhaustive analysis of great military leaders, written by a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and historian, that started me doubting the utility of lists such as these as the sole means of judging leadership. According to the study, the only common qualities among great leaders were courage, intellect, and a strong, determined will. This analysis made me realize that memorizing lists and trying to be the perfect person weren't enough to shape me into the leader I wanted to be or the Corps expected me to be.

Building character and striving to be a good person are certainly good things; anyone who mastered the lists and based his actions on them had to be a far better person than someone who didn't. But few of us attain leadership heights by following that path alone. We all know good people who are not good leaders. The human being who gets shoved into the leadership machine is not a lump of unformed clay. As humankind has learned over many millennia, ideal people with exceptional character traits are exceedingly rare. Sometimes truly good people fail as leaders, and sometimes deeply flawed people prove to be great ones.

I have no doubt that scientific studies can accurately reflect the reality of leadership, and I don't object to efforts to teach leadership techniques or to develop good people with desirable attributes; this training can enhance a leader's leadership skills, and we can certainly use more good people. Sixteen years of Catholic education and thirty-nine years in the Marine Corps have imprinted positive

character traits that continue to make me, the nuns, and the drill sergeants proud. But we must never forget that character development, leadership education, and technical training, however useful, are no substitutes for the real experience of leading. They will never by themselves create a leader who can make hard choices in tough, changing, or surprising conditions. Nor should we forget that humans are complex beings with an infinite range of personalities, temperaments, characteristics, capabilities, and styles of interpersonal interactions. We are still not very successful at understanding what makes humans so different from one another and why and how they develop so uniquely. And we are still too often surprised by who succeeds and who fails.

Leadership development that ignores this reality will inevitably fall short of its aims. You can't produce leaders in a cookie-cutter assembly-line process that strives to radically alter human nature and produce ideal lookalike models. Neither can you create the perfect leader just by modeling the perfect person. Human beings are far too varied and complex for such simplistic methods.

The New Adaptive Leader

Times change, people change, and leaders and their understanding of leadership must change with them. Their changing understanding of leadership will contain elements of both science and art.

The scientific understanding of leadership emphasizes the qualities that distinguish great leaders from others. The art of leadership emphasizes experiential learning and the participatory approach in which leaders draw on the talents and skills of all members of the enterprise yet retain the authority to lead.

What do we really know about today's good leaders? I have learned that those who grow into superb leaders develop faster and in more complete ways than those who do not. They are adaptive leaders. They mature, relate, draw lessons from experiences, and sense their environment much more keenly. They possess an intellect, a sense of dogged determination and will, a charismatic nature, and a degree of personal courage above the norm. They are risk-takers. They are passionate and enthusiastic. Their self-confidence and honesty inspire others.

These qualities are certainly not new. And though in today's complex world they are essential, they are still not enough to achieve success.

Even in the past, they were often not enough. The most successful leaders achieved their success not only because of personal qualities such as these, but because they could interact with and master their environment in ways lesser leaders could not. They were not statues on pedestals. They engaged dynamically with their world. They got dirty. They understood their times and possessed, adapted, or developed the traits and skills that best fit those times. In changing and confusing times, they could see and seize opportunities when others only saw challenges, obstacles, and risks.

Up until our own changed, changing, and confusing times, adaptive leaders have been rare. Today they are necessarily emerging, and in ever-greater numbers. These new leaders sense the changes that are rapidly altering the face of the world, recognize the need to adapt to them, and are driving the organizations they lead toward successes old-style leaders can only envy. It's not enough, as it was in the past, to have just a few dynamic leaders at the top. The quality of adaptive leadership must pervade the participatory organization that is becoming the successful model for today's environment. Any leader who fails to master this adaptability risks seeing his enterprise left in the dust.

"Whatever You're Doing Works"

Good leaders cannot claim success unless they can build good organizations. The people in these organizations, in the current environment, need to be fused with qualities such as adaptability,

innovation, vision, and all the other leadership attributes that used to come from the top down but now must run in all directions in the enterprise. In other words, a few successful individual leaders in charge aren't enough. They must build a culture of leadership that becomes the identity of the organization rather than just that of the top leaders.

One of my fitness-report counseling sessions as a senior captain company commander was different from any I had previously experienced. We had ten captains in our battalion, and our rating scheme encouraged the reporting senior to rank us in order. We captains knew that the battalion commander had a favorite. (I'll call him Bill.) Our CO made no bones about it; he openly admired and praised him. (We, Bill's peers, did not hold him in such regard.) On one typical occasion, I was standing next to the CO as he turned his gaze on Bill: "Ah," he said with a big fatherly smile, "he reminds me so much of myself when I was his age."

The rest of us stoically accepted our inevitable fate on the upcoming fitness reports.

When I entered the CO's office for my turn for counseling, he brusquely handed me my fitness report. "Read it," he ordered.

I did; my jaw dropped. I was rated number one.

I guess my shock was clearly evident. "What's the matter?" the CO asked.

"Well, sir, frankly, I thought that since you have been so open in praising Bill, he would be number one. . . . Not that I'm complaining!"

"Read Section C," he told me.

Section C was where reporting seniors added their own remarks. His were short, terse bullets laying out the accomplishments of my company, such as, "Led battalion in reenlistments. . . . Scored highest in the Tactical Test."

"Look," the CO said, "I like Bill. He is a great individual leader—probably the best in the battalion, in my opinion—but your company was superior. My judgment is based on performance of the organization you lead. Whatever you're doing works."

That was for me one of my greatest "leadership moments." It was the first time I was judged primarily on the performance of my unit and not on how a senior subjectively rated my own individual qualities. It made sense. I certainly liked the outcome!

But as I thought more about it, I realized how rarely we judge the effect of a leader on his organization. How often do we judge leadership on how well our organization performs? In the military, we often talk about the "halo effect" that occurs when an individual's appealing traits or reputation give him a leg up before he has to prove himself. His appearance, previous personal awards, education credentials, articulate manner, or other qualities position him ahead of the rest of the pack. Even if his unit is not as good as others, he still gets the highest ranking or promotion.

We often pay extraordinary compensation packages to CEOs based on these kinds of factors. And then all too often, they run lousy organizations.

We can't separate the individual leader from the performance of the organization and then make excuses for his failure, as if his leadership has meaning outside his organization. It's fine to build a

good person and a good leader, but the complete leadership package comes only when we build a good organization. You cannot separate the two. Leadership today must fuse individual character, ability to lead, and the performance of the organization. Checking only one or two of these blocks is not enough.

Good character alone is no longer enough to define a good leader; successful leaders today are being trained with ever greater emphasis on experiential development; and that there must be greater emphasis on a leader's ability to build an interactive leadership organization rather than one based on top-down individual leadership skill. In today's world, we need to create enterprises that function effectively throughout all their many dimensions yet work as a single organic whole. The hallmark of today's successful new leader is the ability to create and instill this culture of leadership, to build a leadership organization as opposed to an organization that is led.

Beyond Establishing Authority

Leadership is not mysterious. At its core, it is very simple: It is the ability to get people to do what we want them to do.

It's hard to argue with that statement, yet most of us intuitively feel that it's not enough. True leadership demands other essential qualities. To the core statement—"get people to do what we want them to do"—most of us would add something like:

- . . . in an ethical, moral, responsible way.
- . . . that they enjoy, feel good about, and feel fulfilled in doing.
- . . . that builds a cohesive and well-functioning team.
- . . . that brings respect and admiration for the leader and the organization.
- . . . that brings success to the enterprise.

"Get people to do what we want them to do" focuses on the interaction of leading and following. It assumes that leaders possess both authority and power over the led. The led acknowledge the leader's capacity to lead and allow the leader to direct and guide their actions.

The first of the corollary elements points to the leader as the conscience of the organization. It focuses on the principles the leader should follow, the positive traits he should possess, and on his personal responsibility for the outcome of the act of leadership. Results flowing out of true leadership should be positive and not destructive.

The second focuses on the effects on the led. It is hoped that in following a leader, the led will achieve pride, enjoyment, loyalty, and a sense of accomplishment.

The third focuses on building a team, an organization that exceeds the sum of its parts because of the motivation, skill, and direction provided by the leader.

The fourth focuses on the positive reaction the led, the leader's superiors, and all other stakeholders in the enterprise should feel toward the leader.

The last focuses on a successful outcome. Leading that doesn't accomplish the mission, achieve the bottom line, or gain the objective in the most effective and efficient way is, after all, pointless.

These elements are basic and timeless; it's impossible to imagine any responsible transaction involving leaders and led that doesn't include each of these elements as a foundation. —T.Z. and T.K.