

2008 Oxford Leadership Prize



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Characteristics of effective leaders are a topic of constant study and discussion and have led to an array of leadership theories with varying styles. While the implementation of leadership has evolved throughout the centuries, the fundamental definition has remained constant: the ability to affect human behavior or influence a group of people to move towards a goal or accomplish a mission. Conceptual leadership in the 21st century has developed a holistic perspective in comparison to the traditional reductionist viewpoint where a complex system can be explained by reducing the whole to its fundamental parts. In holism, a system as a whole is greater than the individual parts. Indeed, the driving force of holistic leadership is the strengthening of community. Twenty-first century leadership theories which emphasize participative, inspirational, informal, and path-oriented styles, stresses the importance of developing not only individual expertise but group aspirations as well. As Arthur Carmazzi states, “To lead is not to influence others to do something they are not committed to, but rather to nurture a culture that motivates and even excites individuals to do what is required for the benefit of all.” The most important aspects of leadership today focus on finding ways to cultivate a cooperative spirit regardless of the group’s purposes.

A leader is no longer viewed as a hero as seen in reductionism, but as designer, steward, and facilitator whereby participants of a particular group or organization are encouraged by the leader to develop a shared vision that is future-focused and built on group strengths. Leaders are not dictators, solely responsible for vision and the execution of ideas, but instead focus on encouraging individual and group development which eventually leads to corporate improvement. Furthermore, the main objective of a leader is not only directing a set of goals to complete a specific task, but is also improving the

well-being of those who participate in the project. Instead of executive decision-making, the role of a modern-day leader is to stimulate communication in order to discover common ground amidst diversity, assign tasks to people based on their strengths and potential, and make final decisions based on ideas formed by the participants.

Effective 21st century leaders realize they work for the people and not the other way around; a leader can remain a prosperous leader only with the support of the people. Executives who are people-oriented leaders focus on the big picture and not only want to effectively achieve company goals, but increase job satisfaction within the working community as well. Good leading inspires enthusiasm in others to accomplish specific tasks and provides energy to get the job done efficiently. One way this is accomplished is by listening intently to people and understanding their point of view; this gives value to each participant within a project and allows for open communication by setting an example. A leader needs a flexible and open-minded attitude that can reflect on other's opinions and constantly adapt to challenges yet adhere to essential values and principles. As Thomas Jefferson stated, "In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principles, stand like a rock." This approach leads to a mutual respect between workers and leader(s), building trust and ultimately results in a relational and synergistic work environment.

Building an open and trusting relationship between employers and employees is a process leaders should set as a high priority. One way this is accomplished is by leaders being visually present within the working community. Any participant who carries out specific roles within an establishment will genuinely appreciate the "boss" working along side them and listening to their opinions. This improves the relationship between

supervisors and workers because it gives the chance for workers to express their thoughts and concerns regarding their specific task. The experience is also beneficial for leaders since they are receiving input on ways to enhance quality and efficiency from the individuals who are experts at their particular job.

The process of globalization has opened up new and diverse opportunities for businesses, institutions, and charities to improve the well-being of people all over the world. The desire to help people in need is a primary attribute any leader must acquire in order to improve health and save lives whether it is residents of impoverished nations or cancer sufferers. Empathy and humility are imperative attributes in people whose aspiration is to change lives for the better. Believing all people are equal and attempting to put yourself in someone else's position serve as the backbone of most charitable actions. These qualities are especially important in leaders because they establish the basic principles and morals of any project. Too often leaders of large corporations, organizations, institutions or businesses focus solely on making money for themselves and/or colleagues which in turn improves their lives yet has no positive affect on others.

In order for a group or organization to have a positive impact on the world, they must be outwardly focused and have compassion for those who suffer plus a willingness to help. People who are outward focused direct their time and energy on ways to improve lives outside their group instead of concentrating on ways to benefit themselves. The most impacting people value the lives of strangers above their own. These characteristics are essential for a leader because they serve as a model for those who follow. The principles and ideals of the head of any group serve as a foundation towards future-focused plans since decisions are ultimately made by the leader; ideas formed by

the participants are colored based on what they believe the leader wants to hear and the options he or she will eventually choose. If a leader of any group puts more emphasis on their own cause above helping others, there will be a minimal improvement in the lives of other people.

The concept of 'improving health and saving lives' can roughly embody two broad aspects: advancement of medical science and provision of impoverished communities. The qualities needed to tackle these issues vary somewhat, but do have underlying similarities. For example, both require education as well as resource availability in order to attain their goals. Since it is impossible to solve complex medical mysteries without knowing fundamental principles of human life, scientific discovery begins with education. In addition to background knowledge, scientists require resources in order to carry out experiments that may ultimately lead to cures for complicated diseases. Similarly, impoverished communities need to be trained through education in ways to improve their lives with techniques such as farming and sanitation. However, in order to carry out learned skills and achieve goals they require specific equipment. A good leader not only understands the value and importance of education and obtainable resources but also frames their decisions regarding future projects based on the advancement of these factors.

A massive challenge leaders face in combating poverty is trying to decipher the most comprehensive and appropriate way of spending money. Today's world has a vast amount of information available and extensive capacities to find answers. A leader must wisely delegate to others the task of gathering relevant information to make certain the correct vision can be achieved. For example, if a leader wanted to provide food to a

certain community, he or she must take into account every factor to ensure success. The aid may prove unfruitful if it was not known that the community would benefit more from adequate housing or resources for digging wells. Once the information is gathered, a vision must be established by utilizing a group discussion where each participant can contribute to the brainstorming of ideas. This approach allows for more varied and complex ideas to be formed. A leader's job is to redirect the discussion and ask relevant questions to focus the group on a particular subject which results in specific goals agreed upon by the entire group. The process provides each participant with a chance to learn pertinent material, encourages communication, and promotes commitment to the project. Engaging the group in the development of the project will ultimately enhance the likelihood of success.

The most important challenge leaders face is determining the most beneficial and effective methods of not only reducing poverty but also improving the well-being of the donors. This requires an outward point of view and an open-minded attitude when reviewing all possible choices in policy-making. Effective leaders focus on a bigger picture that includes every person involved within the project; giving only money to people in need may help those who suffer, but it has no direct effect on the person(s) who gave the money. Instead, implicated strategies should be used where money is given to those who are in need but also has a positive impact on the givers by establishing direct contact with the receivers. This approach would benefit every person involved, both the participant and recipient.

One reason charities such as Feed the Children are so effective is because the giver is able to sponsor a child and have direct contact with the recipient of the

contribution in the form of pictures and monthly updates. This form of aid not only benefits those who suffer but also improves the well-being of those who give by providing a clear indication on how their generosity is helping others. The tangible and positive feedback helps encourage them to continue giving. Charities such as Action for Children and Physicians for Peace have realized the importance of personal contact and now offer the means to visit sponsored children. Consequently, these organizations have grown tremendously, mostly by word of mouth due to life-changing experiences. Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit interest group who engages volunteers in order to construct simple and affordable houses while building community in the area, has built over 200,000 homes worldwide. Leaders should help develop visions that focus on the well-being of every individual in order to maximize possible potential for growth.

Advancement of medical research is one of the most important ways to save lives and improve health. The most important yet limiting factor in the advancement of medical science is the contribution and distribution of money. Deciding what problems are the most urgent and the best way to allocate funds are some of the most challenging issues leaders face. This is especially important on a global scale where specific epidemics affect poorer countries which do not have the capacity to help themselves; compassion must be given to ensure research is done on diseases prevalent in impoverished nations. One example is tuberculosis which kills approximately two million people every year – mostly people from underdeveloped countries. Funding to develop treatments against drug-resistant strains must be secured despite the low incidence levels in Europe and the Americas. Because of the complexity and intricacies medical sciences poses, delegating the task of gathering information in regards to

distribution of money in the most beneficial manner is especially important for leaders. They must also ensure communication between recipients and benefactors due to the rapid development in world crisis's and research's constant evolution.

Contributing financial resources towards research does not have to benefit only those at the receiving end; twenty-first century leadership focuses on ways to improve not only the beneficiary but also the sponsor. For example, if a company decided to donate money to science, the leaders of the company could conduct a survey to all the employees to determine what topics people care about. If 10 out of 100 employees had family members suffering from Alzheimer's disease, the company could choose to donate the money towards a university or society researching that specific field. The benefit of employee participation in the decision-making process is that the workers see that the leaders of the company care for people and want to do something to help those who suffer. It demonstrates that the leaders not only care for people in general, but value the lives of their employee's family and friends. Additionally, it shows the employees that their opinion matters in executive decisions. This would benefit the company by strengthening bonds of community and gives importance to each individual because their opinion impacted the overall result.

Recently, a large insurance company in the United States of America began a giving program during the month of December. The system that was instigated designated teams of employees who were given a chance to design a plan that spent company money on a cause benefiting underprivileged families within the city. Each team came up with ideas such as Christmas toys and clothes for children, warm turkey meals for a Christmas dinner, and gift certificates for free gas. They also formed practical

plans to carry out their idea. The plans from each group were compiled and then sent around to the other teams in order for them to vote on the three best ideas excluding their own. Company funds were then devoted to the three proposals with the highest ratings to complement the time each employee dedicated to the plans. Hundreds of needy families not only received benefits such as food and money, but the development of important programs such as babysitting or teaching English carried out by the employees as well. The program deepened the sense of community within the company by giving the employees a chance to participate in the brainstorming of ideas and also in executive decision-making. Ultimately, the program helped struggling families and improved working relationships and overall productivity.

Leadership in the 21st century is much more than making decisions that move a business, organization, or institution towards a designated goal. No longer is monetary profit the primary concern for any group of people. It is about achieving a sense of well-being in the participants and also helping people who do not have the necessary resources to help themselves. The most contributory aspects in 21st century leadership that will ultimately improve health and save lives globally are compassion for all people, whether they are young, old, rich, or poor and a willingness to contribute time and resources. A modern-day leader must understand that the world is intricately connected, and that when they choose to help someone else, they are ultimately helping themselves. Whether by donating money to scientific research or giving old drills to aid communities in Africa to build fresh water supplies, the improved lives will eventually enrich their own cause as well. Learning and putting into operation the best methods to build up community within an establishment should be the ambition for any leader. Allowing participants to

contribute ideas and develop a shared vision is the first step in establishing a strong group that can carry out confirmed objectives. Leaders of any group must have a purpose of improving the lives of those directly involved with the organization, as well as a global ambition of helping others. The leaders who will prove to have the largest impact on humanity will use their establishment to not only help their own employees or participants, but also those who cannot help themselves. These leaders will forever change and improve our world, enhancing the well-being of all people and leading them towards a more rewarding life.