Reflections on Leadership

By Nancy P. Pursley
“Beyond the horizon of time is a changed world, very different from today’s world. Some people see beyond that horizon and into the future. They believe that dreams can become reality. They open our eyes and lift our spirits. They build trust and strengthen our relationships. They stand firm against the wind of resistance and give us the courage to continue the quest. We call these people leaders.” (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, p. 317).

For many of us leadership is much like quality – we know it when we see it but have a difficult time defining or describing it. The quote from Kouzes and Posner captures what many of us think about when asked to describe a leader. As I think about leadership, there are six principles that appear to me to define what it means to be a leader.

- Leaders must focus on mission and see what is on the horizon. They are the “pathfinders.”
- Leaders convey and model values for the organization. They serve as “the moral compass.”
- Leaders must pay attention to their organization’s culture and be proactive in shaping the environment in which others will do their work.
- Leaders must be risk takers. This may in fact be the litmus test for a leader – what distinguishes those who lead from those who follow.
- Leaders empower others. They build and foster trust among others and build teams to accomplish the organization’s mission and vision.
- Leaders must understand themselves. There is a lot of “inner work” that leaders must do.

Further, “What does it take to be a leader?” There are three things that characterize a leader. Leaders are distinguished by their courage, their credibility, and their convictions. Having the courage to lead is perhaps the most important characteristic of a true leader. Leadership is tough because leadership is about change, either initiating change in an organization or steering an organization in a changing, even chaotic environment. Leaders sometimes meet with resistance and must be able to stay the course in spite of obstacles and disappointments. Leadership is ultimately about courage and the will to press on in spite of challenges and criticisms.

Leadership is also about convictions and having the integrity to live by one’s convictions. Leaders must have strong values and beliefs. They must be able to demonstrate these values and convey them to their followers.

Finally, leadership is about credibility. Without followers, there are no leaders. It is the leader’s credibility that encourages others to join the quest, to move toward the horizon, to achieve the organization’s mission.

The environment in which we lead has a significant impact on how we go about leading and how we perceive our leaders. Leaders are in the business of getting things done in a world of chaos and change. We live in a changing environment characterized by ambiguity and lack of clarity. In fact, tolerance for ambiguity and change is critical for both leaders and followers. The future is uncharted territory that some have referred to as a “wilderness.” The willingness to step out in front, to be a pathfinder in the wilderness of the future, distinguishes those who would lead from those who would follow.

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Many theories of leadership have been suggested and researched. Early theories focused on the personal characteristics and personality traits of leaders. It was believed that leaders were born, not made. We have moved away from that thinking and now see leadership as a set of learned skills. We believe that leaders are made, not born.

Other leadership theories have focused on the behavior of leaders. For example, leaders were compared based on task-oriented behaviors and relationship-oriented behaviors. Leadership styles were assessed based on autocratic and participative approaches. Current thinking favors relationship-oriented, participative approaches.

Leadership has also been examined in terms of the power and influence exercised by the leader. The sources of power and how power is used have been examined to better understand how individuals demonstrate leadership.

Additionally, a number of situational contingency leadership theories have been proposed. Some of these theories suggest that leadership style should be adapted to the situation and others suggest that leadership style should be based on the characteristics of the followers.

Integrated leadership approaches have also been studied. Leaders have been examined in terms of their charisma, the types of charisma and how charisma contributes to various leadership styles. One theory categorizes leaders as “transactional or transformational.” Transactional leaders are those who reward others for their performance and commitment to mission and transformational leaders are those who inspire others to excel (Kouzes and Posner, p. 321). Current thought about organizations and leadership
supports the transformational aspects of leadership and views the leader as an agent of change within the organization.

In thinking about these various theories, one wonders about the relationship between organizational theory and leadership theory. As our understanding of organizations has evolved, what influence has that had on leadership theory? If we view organizations as systems subject to the laws of science as suggested by Margaret Wheatley, what type of leader is required? If we view organizations as bureaucracies as suggested by Max Weber, what type of leader is needed? Our understanding of human behavior, changes in the way we work, and the changing context of organizations, e.g., transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, all contribute to the evolution of leadership theories. As our knowledge of organizations and how we work evolves, our understanding of leadership is likewise changed and influenced.

**MY LEADERSHIP THEORY**

It is within this context that my perspectives on leadership have been developed. My thoughts on this are an amalgam of what I have read, what I have experienced, and the lessons that I have learned along the way. Due to the complex nature of leadership and the number of theories that have been suggested, it is important that leaders and those who aspire to leadership develop their own personal philosophy of leadership. My philosophy of leadership as stated earlier includes six principles: (1) focusing on mission and vision; (2) modeling values; (3) shaping the organization’s culture; (4) taking risks; (5) empowering others; and (6) understanding oneself. My belief is that today’s organizations, including those in the public sector, require leaders that are more transformational than transactional. The followers in today’s organizations are different and therefore their leaders must also be different.

**Focusing on Mission and Vision**

One of the greatest challenges for a leader is to stay on mission. People need to know where they are going and what is expected of them if they are to follow. Consistently focusing on the organization’s vision and mission is a critical task for a leader.

The leader starts by defining the vision and then keeping it alive. The leader is ultimately responsible for achieving the vision and must therefore communicate the vision both within and outside of the organization. In this sense, the leader serves as a conduit or bridge between the organization and its environment. Beyond communicating the vision, the leader must also be able to inspire others to achieve the vision and to believe that it can be achieved.

A key aspect of the leader’s role in relation to vision and mission is the ability to focus on the organization’s attention on the factors critical to its success. The leader must be able to keep stated goals in front of the organization and assist others in identifying and reinforcing what is most important to the organization’s success. Reducing the vision and mission to its essence and consistently communicating this inside and outside of the organization is the key role of the leader related to vision and mission.

In order to do this, the leader must set aside his or her own agenda for that of the organization. While they do not have to be the same, there must be congruence between the leader’s personal mission and that of the organization. This is where the “inner work” of the leader becomes crucial. The leader must constantly be in touch with his/her motivations. Followers will sense when a personal agenda becomes more important than the interests of the organization as a whole.

Finally, the leader demonstrates his/her commitment to the mission and vision by providing for a successor. For some leaders this is very difficult. They may be so focused on accomplishing the vision and goals that they do not have time to contemplate a future in which the organization will move forward without them. They may not grasp their own organizational “mortality.”

**Modeling Values**

Beyond focusing on the mission and vision, a leader must pay attention to the values by which one wants the organization to operate. The leader is responsible for developing and shaping the values that are most important to the organization and to how it does business. The organization’s values will be a reflection of the individual leader’s values, so once again the “inner work” of the leader is involved.

The leader must convey the organization’s values, as well as serve as a role model for the behaviors that reflect the values within the context of the organization’s day-to-day activities. One must inspire others to adhere to the values and behave in ways that are consistent with the espoused values.

In order to do this a leader must have a moral compass that helps one focus on “true north.” The importance of the leader’s integrity cannot be overemphasized. Credibility is earned and can be easily lost if the leader does not behave in ways consistent with the values that he or she seeks to inspire. Stephen Covey (1992) refers to this as principle-centered leadership. It is an important concept, particularly in light of the dynamic environment in which organizations operate today. Leaders need an effective moral capacity by which to navigate the turbulent seas of organizational life.
**Shaping the Organization’s Culture**

Closely related to defining and conveying the organization’s values is the leader’s responsibility for shaping and forming the organization’s culture. Schein (1992) describes culture in terms of shared assumptions, values and beliefs about a group or organization. It is the leader’s responsibility to create and foster a climate or environment in which others can be successful and can achieve the organization’s vision and goals. This means providing the tools and resources for achieving the organization’s ends, as well as fostering a supportive culture.

Proactively shaping and defining the organization’s culture is an activity that is often neglected by leaders. Due to the pressures of balancing the other roles related to leadership, the importance of the organization’s culture in achieving the mission can be overlooked. Schein (1992) asserts that “this ability to perceive the limitations of one’s own culture and to develop the culture adaptively is the essence and ultimate challenge of leadership” (p. 2).

Conveying values is part of, but not the same as, creating and fostering organizational culture. If the leader focuses on mission and conveys values without paying attention to the organization’s culture, the vision and goals may not be achieved. Creating a culture in which people know what is expected and can do their best work is vital to the organization’s (and by extension the leader’s) success. The organization’s culture should not be left to chance. As Schein (1996) points out, the leader is the animator, creator and sustainer of culture.

**Taking Risks**

Risk taking embodies the fourth principle of my personal philosophy of leadership. As mentioned before, this may be the critical factor that distinguishes leaders from followers. The courage to take risks, to step out in front, to be the pathfinder is recognized by the members of the organization and sets the leader apart from the rest of the organization.

As Kouzes and Posner (1995) point out, leaders must be “pioneers.” They venture to the edge of the horizon and report back about what they see. In this sense, they are the scout or the point person for the organization.

Leaders take risks for the sake of the mission and goals of the organization. Some leaders are more comfortable with this role than others and there are certainly different degrees of risk associated with the decisions that leaders must make. However, I would argue that those who are “risk averse” cannot be leaders. Someone who does not have the courage to take risks may hold a position of leadership but cannot be a true leader. They are instead more of a caretaker for their organization than a leader.

Max DePree (1997) refers to a conundrum related to risk. Risking nothing may involve the greatest risk of all. I agree with DePree. I believe that leaders must be pathfinders rather than risking doing nothing at all. Risk avoidance is surely a recipe for failure, not only for the leader but for the organization as well.

**Empowering Others**

The fifth principle of my leadership philosophy relates to the leader’s role in empowering others. Empowerment involves conveying the mission and goals in such a way that people can use their initiative and make decisions on their own. It also involves creating a culture in which initiative, risk taking, and learning is valued.

One’s beliefs and attitudes about people and their motivations fosters empowerment. In order to trust others to act in the best interests of the organization and its mission, one must believe the best about people. Ascribing to Deming’s view that problems are caused by organizational systems and not people is helpful in empowering others. Senge’s (1990) notion of the learning organization in which a certain amount of error is acceptable as long as it is used as an opportunity for organizational learning also fits with empowering others to carry out the organization’s mission and goals.

Paying attention to relationships within the organization and being able to balance individual needs and organizational goals are important aspects of leadership. Leaders may spend much of their time seeking win-win relationships between the organization and its employees (collectively and individually). Being inclusive and providing information foster empowering others to act in the best interests of the organization.

Clearly a basic requirement for empowerment is establishing trust between the leader and his or her followers. Trust is the foundation of an effective organization and is critical to leadership. In fact, one could argue that leadership is not possible where there is not trust. From this perspective, it is clear that building a relationship of trust between the leader and his followers is a crucial role of the leader.

Building a team is also related to empowerment and establishing trust. As Wilkes (1998) points out, effective leaders take the time to understand the strengths and weaknesses of those who follow them. They create an environment in which the individual team members’ strengths can be amplified and weaknesses minimized.

Without building a team, a leader is limited in what he or she can accomplish. Leaders can burn themselves out and wear out their followers if they do not build effective teams to help them reach the organization’s goals. According to Wilkes (1998), “Good leaders mentor and empower
capable people to help them do the job” (p. 235).

Understanding Oneself

The final principle of my personal leadership theory involves the leader’s understanding of self. As suggested by O’Neill (1993), leaders must know themselves and take time for regular renewal in order to be effective leaders. These periods of renewal allow leaders to reflect on themselves and their organizations and hopefully lead to new insights that will make them better leaders.

Gaining a better understanding of oneself also allows the leader to become more comfortable with himself or herself. Leaders must have a “thick skin” in order to be comfortable with others’ responses to their decisions. Having confidence in oneself can certainly foster a higher degree of comfort with one’s decisions and actions. This sense of confidence also contributes to the leader’s credibility with his followers.

The leader needs to read continually about leadership, refine ideas and test new ways of leading. As with other members of the organization, the leader needs to be a lifelong learner. Given the dynamic environment in which one must lead, being a student of oneself, one’s organization, and one’s environment is essential. It is important that one create and protect time for reflection and learning.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the six principles of leadership previously discussed, there are some personal characteristics that I believe distinguish successful leaders. Leaders must have the desire and the will to lead, which requires confidence and courage. The desire to make a difference is what ultimately sets leaders apart from their followers.

Leaders must also have credibility and be able to build trust among their followers. Without that relationship of trust, leadership cannot exist. Once attained, leaders must carefully guard their credibility in order to continue to be effective leaders. Living by one’s convictions and personal values can help establish credibility with one’s followers.

Finally, leaders must be able to inspire hope in their followers. Challenges and setbacks must be overcome. Problems must be resolved. Mountains must be climbed, so to speak, so that the horizon is once more in view. Inspiring hope and envisioning a better future is ultimately what leadership is about.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy P. Pursley, MPA, DHA, is Associate Director of the Institute for Public Service and Policy Research. Dr. Pursley joined the Institute in 1990 and served as Senior Public Service Associate in the Center for Governance and Assistant Director of the Center for Health Services and Policy Research prior to her appointment as Associate Director. Dr. Pursley worked in several health and human service related state agencies before coming to the University of South Carolina. She holds a BA from Columbia College, a Master of Public Administration and Graduate Certificate in Gerontology from the University of South Carolina, and a Doctor of Health Administration from the Medical University of South Carolina. Dr. Pursley’s areas of interest include organizational culture, organizational development, quality improvement, and health policy. Dr. Pursley can be contacted at pursley@sc.edu.