

Demystifying the mysterious leadership arena

BY JOHN MCLACHLAN

As the title itself suggests, there is a belief out there (though I don't know where it came from) that leadership is in some way mysterious...

I think it is less about being mysterious and more about people looking for one simple answer to a complex and personal question.

There is no "one size fits all" answer to what makes a leader and it has arisen many arguments around most dinner tables, and post-work pub get-togethers. What makes a good leader and what makes a bad one? Does the world need leaders who are strong, single-minded and driven to get things done quickly, or leaders that are flexible, able to listen to everyone's opinions and who take time to reflect and consider before doing anything?

The reason there is so much argument and discussion about good leaders is that what makes a good leader is, like most things, based on our opinion, experience and what values we have been brought up with.

In the research for our book, *Real Leaders for the Real World*, we asked over 60 leaders from all walks of life a number of questions around leadership. Those who responded either considered themselves 'a good leader', or were nominated to complete the research by someone else who saw them as one. We deliberately left the decision about what a good leader was to the individual. We didn't want to define what 'a good leader' was, as we were interested in people's perception of a good leader.

The overwhelming message in the study was that there are a common set of problems and challenges good leaders face and that there are a set of key traits that real leaders either have, or are striving to achieve.

We summarised the problems as the age old problems of time and other people. The challenge for leaders with time is in how they use it and whether they are in control of their own time. Real leaders naturally have, or have acquired skills to use their time in the most effective way for them and don't run around trying to get everything done yesterday, and with people, good leaders treat them as human beings first,



empower and encourage them to use their own style and skills, rather than seek to control them and tell them how they should behave.

The traits, whilst not seen often enough and constantly enough in the current leadership arena, were not mysterious at all, nor something only the select few were born with, or something only the strong and the brave can do. They were traits we all have and can develop.

The five traits we identified of real leaders are that they:

- Use Feedback to Succeed
- Take Considered Risks
- Are Forward Focused and Flexible
- Do what they Say and Say what they Do
- Develop Real Relationships with People

Underpinning all of this is what in the book we call 'emotional regulation'. Emotional regulation is essential for any good leader and is not very common. Emotional regulation is having the ability to respond appropriately in any given situations, if you are irritated be irritated, if you are happy be happy. It is not about being emotional, neutral, or emotionally volatile, it is about having an emotional stability that allows a

leader to respond effectively and efficiently to whatever situation that may arise.

What we have found is that leadership, the nurturing of the next generation and the growth of the world we live in, is something that each and every one of us can play our part into. Leaders come in many shapes and sizes and we believe, strongly as you can probably tell, that the key to great leadership is not in a list of skills that a leader must acquire. Leadership is in the development of the person themselves, their emotional regulation, their integrity and in their ability for expansive thinking. These traits are the foundation upon which any skills can sit and be fully, effectively and efficiently utilised. This is different for each and every one of us and that is both the challenge and the opportunity that we are asking you to sign up for. We can all play our part.

Good leadership is not mysterious, real leaders are not mysterious; they are simply rare at the moment.

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