

My Understanding of Leadership

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Leadership is an incredible paradox – that is, leadership is simple. Leadership, stated plainly, is nothing more than courage, passion, and service. However, despite its simplicity, leadership has been the greatest challenge of my life. That is why the study of leadership is so fascinating, and, daresay, worthwhile because leadership pushes me outside my comfort zone, daring me to be the greatest version of myself. Leadership tests me at my core. Courage, passion, and service are simple ideas, but they cannot be faked; people will see right through that. Leaders whom I admire are alive with these qualities, such that they not only exhibit but become them.

Courage is, perhaps, the most important component of leadership. I identify with Nelson Mandela's definition of courage: "Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave (wo)man is not (s)he who does not feel afraid, but (s)he who conquers that fear." The complete and total absence of fear would be reckless, but to acknowledge fear for what it is and then continue to move forward is leadership. Leaders are not fearless but rather, fear conquerors. Fears I wrestle with, for example, are the fears of making a mistake or worse, of not being good enough; however, great leaders do as I am learning to do. They do not fear but embrace failure, welcoming it as a step nearer to success. This allows them to lead in bold spirit and strive valiantly as if they have nothing to lose. The fullest potential of a leader might be achieved the very moment her heart is void of even a single ounce of fear. The difference between a mediocre leader and a great leader is that one holds back. A great leader walks through fire not because she is confident in her success every time; she walks through fire with the knowledge that her team will follow because win or lose, she will give it her all.

Passion is the heart of leadership, as everything a leader does flows out of it. Defeat after defeat, or when no one else believes in the leader's success, passion is the "why" behind her perseverance. A passionate leader is prepared to do whatever it takes; whether that means working while her enemies are sleeping or shaking the dust off after the one-hundredth knockdown, defeat is not part of her vocabulary. Great leadership requires deep commitment and wholehearted pursuit that demands true passion. The latter part of Mandela's quote states, "(S)he who conquers that fear." Passion conquers fear. Passionate leaders are propelled by their passion, especially when the pressure is high. A passionate leader can shrug at the possibility of making a mistake or of defeat because, ultimately, she is not there for that win; she is there simply because she loves what she is doing. She knows that she will learn from any mistake and press onwards, all for the love of her cause.

A leader might earn the respect of her followers through servant leadership. Paul, the apostle of Jesus, provides insight into the meaning of servant leadership in his first letter written to the people of Corinth, "A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God." The Greek word Paul used that we translate as servants is *huperetes*, meaning "unde-rowers." The under-rowers sat on the lowest deck of an ancient Roman ship whose job was to perform hard labor by rowing to the beat of the captain's drum. The under rowers worked tirelessly to move the ship, but they were essentially invisible on the lowest deck. Human nature is to want to be popular and receive all the glory for the success of your team. However, a servant leader acts in opposition to human nature – with humility. Like an under-rower, a servant leader carries her team forward by dedicating herself to the needs of her followers. A servant leader works behind the scenes even when her followers are resting. When success comes, the followers receive all the glory because a great leader knows, from the bottom of her heart, that success ultimately depended upon them.

Dr. Sowcik posed this question in class, “What would you do if you were completely unafraid?” Several students raised their hands with their answers centered around the theme of increased boldness. The truth is, however, I would make extremely poor decisions. Fear is an adaptive trait, meaning that it increases our odds of survival. Fear gets a bad rap, but it is not intrinsically harmful; it is the duty of a leader to assess the risks versus rewards.

Dr. Sowcik went on to discuss common risks in leadership: failure, rejection, chaos, conflict, and change. An effective leader recognizes when a reward outweighs its associated risks and proceeds without looking back. She is bound to fail in this process, likely several times over. Not everyone on her team will accept her point of view and conflict will probably ensue. She knows these are less of risks as they are inevitabilities; therefore, she expects, not fears them. In fact, if none of these risk factors are prevalent, she is probably not daring greatly enough.

Roosevelt provides insight,

It's not the critic who counts, not the (wo)man who points out how the strong (wo)man stumbled, or when the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the (wo)man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends (her)self in a worthy cause; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if (s)he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that (her) place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Those leaders who are unwilling to take risks, he describes as “cold and timid souls.” The result of leadership without risk is stagnation; these leaders are, in a sense, frozen in fear. It is true that they do not fail, but they do not succeed either. The children’s leukemia ward in the National

Cancer Institute in 1955 was abound with these types of leaders. In 1955, childhood leukemia was the monster of all cancers. It would strike children as young as one or two without warning. First, there was a fever, and then it would quickly progress into violent bleeding. Ninety percent of kids who arrived at the hospital would die within six weeks of their stay (Sandomir, 2021). The doctors continued practicing with the same traditional treatment methods, getting nowhere closer to a cure. That is until Dr. Freireich arrived. He was convinced that the problem was a lack of platelets (without platelets blood cannot clot), a radical idea scoffed at by his colleagues. The NCI blood bank refused to give him the fresh blood he needed for transfusions, so he took it upon himself to recruit his own blood donors. Standard blood transfusion devices were made of steel, but the platelets stuck to those surfaces. He developed a new silicon technology to overcome this. The silicon bags used to collect blood were enormous compared to the children, and heart failure was a major risk if done improperly. His director threatened to fire him if he continued the transfusions and his colleagues called him insane.

Dr. Freireich went down in history as a founding father of modern clinical cancer research. His work was a major breakthrough because it stopped the bleeding and children could be kept alive long enough that the underlying cause of their illness could be treated. Dr. Friereich embodied everything it means to be a courageous leader. Childhood leukemia was, for obvious reasons, an extreme issue. Solving such an issue meant accepting extreme risks – being outcasted, fired, and sending a child into heart failure. Dr. Freireich did what the other doctors could not do, risk everything. He courageously obtained an extreme reward with extreme risks.

Dr. Freireich had every reason to give up. I have watched leaders in my own life persevere when it would have been much easier to quit. Why did they push on? *Why?* This simple, three-letter word means everything in leadership. A leader's "why" ultimately comes

down to what they are passionate about. Most leaders are passionate about money or success, but great leaders simply love what they do and the people they do it with.

I have played softball since I was big enough to swing a bat. My last year playing was, by far, the most trying time of my life, and yet I would not trade it for anything. It taught me what Roosevelt meant by “effort, pain, and difficulty.” I was the lone senior on my team, and I felt like our success was my sole responsibility. The pressure eventually became insurmountable, and my performance suffered as a result.

Simon Sinek is an author, inspirational speaker, and pioneer in the field of business leadership. He invented “The Golden Circle,” which he explained in a Ted Talk on personal branding. Essentially, the center of the circle is the “why,” the passion behind an organization. The middle layer is the “how,” things that set you apart from your competition. The outer rim is the “what,” the output of an organization. My senior year, I knew “what” we had to do, win games; I had a good idea of “how” to do it, throw strikes; however, I had completely lost sight of my “why.” Missing this critical component, I dreaded practice and anxious thoughts took over my head space during games. My detriment was starting from the outside of the circle, the wrong way to lead according to Sinek.

The season began to turn around when I rediscovered my “why,” which was simply my love for the sport. I fell in love with softball when I was a little girl. The relief that came with leaving my worries behind the moment my cleats hit the dirt and the high that came with making the last out of an inning were some of my favorite aspects of the game. The pressure was replaced by passion, and I finished my season strong. I stopped glancing at the scoreboard. I was not on the mound for the numbers, but instead, for the simple joy that pitching brought me. Win or lose, I would look forward to practicing the next day prepared to play my heart out.

Not only did I love the sport itself, but I also loved my teammates. Ally, a senior before me with whom I had the honor of playing with, loved her teammates exceptionally well. Her teammates were her family, and there was never any question about how far Ally would go for you. She made sure that each individual was aware of the value they brought to the team. No person was ever overlooked by her. The result was every teammate banding together to win for Ally, to reciprocate that love.

Sinek converges on the importance of loving those on your team. He provides an American soldier, Captain William Swenson, as an example in another Ted Talk. Swenson was awarded the congressional medal of honor for the selfless actions he took in Operation Desert Storm. His troop was caught under ambush and surrounded by enemies on all sides. Swenson ran into the live fire to rescue his men. Swenson is seen on footage kissing one soldier before returning to the kill zone to rescue more. When questioned about his actions, Swenson simply responded “They would have done it for me.”

Ally, like Swenson, was deeply passionate about her teammates. She loved *you*, not just the game you played together. This created a culture of unitedness and a desire to win not for ourselves but for the girls to the left and to the right of us. Passion for the cause of your team as well as for the team itself are critical components of great leadership.

Servant leadership involves both service and influence; like two pieces from opposite ends of a puzzle, it seemed wrong to combine these. Servant leadership was first theorized in 1970 by Robert K. Greenleaf, but it only became popular in the last ten years. What comes to mind for most people when they think of the term “leader” is someone mighty and high standing. A king would certainly meet these requirements. Encyclopædia Britannica defines a king as “a supreme ruler, sovereign over a nation or a territory, of higher rank than any other.” The key

distinction is that a king is a *ruler*, not a leader. Kings motivate followers with their power (namely, money or threats), often in a self-consumed and exploitative manner. Motivation in this way is bound to falter; it is purely exterior and a cheap imitation of true motivation.

There was one king in history, however, who was set apart from the rest. His name was Jesus Christ who some might call the king of all kings. He was the son of God, the maker of the heavens and the earth, the creator of the universe! Yet, Jesus performs this extraordinary act as accounted in the book of John,

“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

When one person entered the home, there would be a basin to wash his feet, and when many people entered the home, there would be a servant waiting to perform the task. Jesus and his disciples were eating in a borrowed space, with no servant present. Eating a meal with unclean feet was unconventional and would have created an uneasiness about the room; however, no one wanted to speak up for fear that Jesus would make him wash feet, deeming him the lowliest disciple. Jesus allowed the tension to accumulate in the room for dramatic effect when he would do it himself. This humility was unprecedented. One commentator on the book of John puts it this way:

“A wife might wash her husband’s feet, children might wash their father’s feet, and disciples might wash their master’s feet, but in every case it would be an act of extreme devotion. Footwashing was normally carried out by a servant, not by those participating

in the meal, and certainly not by the one presiding at the meal. According to later Jewish tradition, a Jewish slave would not be asked to wash people's feet. That task was assigned to a Gentile slave.”

These were some of Jesus' final moments with his disciples, which made this act even more powerful. It was a lesson he wanted to leave them with so they would never forget it.

In the game of softball, everyone looks at leadership from the lens of game preparation and execution. Events immediately following the game tend to get overlooked, but these are actually critical moments that distinguish servant leaders from rulers. Picture a softball team who just won the county tournament championship, qualifying them for the district tournament. There is a spirit of celebration in the air and feelings of hard work paid off. It is time for a team picture with the oversized trophy now. The ruler places herself in the center, and she is probably the one holding the trophy. Just minutes later, she will already be on her way to the parking lot making conversation with a coach. Rulers are immensely friendly to those holding power, and they will be among the first to leave. The servant leader will not be found in the center of the team picture holding the trophy. Instead, she ensures that every team member understands their contribution to the win and the value they bring to the team. She can be found picking up stray balls or sweeping the dugout, the type of jobs no one wants to perform after an exhausting game. The servant leader is the last to the parking lot, but, in truth, she never really leaves that field. She will continue to think about how she might improve as a leader, how she might improve the game of her followers, and, ultimately, how to get that next win.

For reasons that go without saying, Jesus was one of a kind. However, everyone has the capacity to be a servant leader. Servant leadership is about putting the needs of your followers first and foremost. When a servant leader sacrifices to meet followers' needs, followers are likely

to meet the leader's needs in return. In other words, when follower needs become important, leader needs become important too.

Leadership involves the ideas of courage, passion, and service. It is easy to discuss these principles and even claim to lead by them, but the difficulty arises in practice, when these are confronted with human nature. The triumph over fear, focused passion, and selflessness are all outside the comfort zone. Not one of these components is ever truly "achieved," but rather pursued after in a difficult and lifelong process that is leadership.

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