

Ask a sizeable group of people the following: "Show of hands -- Who among you thinks you are good looking?" Most people will tightly grasp their hands in their lap. A few might be so bold to publicly proclaim their beauty, but we know who those few people are and would expect them to do so.

The majority of people will either believe it is not true or believe it is true but are fearful of someone challenging their belief. In both cases, it really has little to do with their actual looks. It has more to do with how others have responded to them in the past. Leadership is a lot like that.

Same experiment: "Show of hands - Who among you believe you are a leader?" There is just something about that question that keeps genuine leaders from admitting publicly that they believe such a claim. The position of leadership is really presented to the leader by those that follow them.

So, if the moniker of leadership is bestowed by those we lead, then how do we get started? How does a new leader garner the support of those under their charge? The myths of leadership fill volumes of books. Most of these books are written by self-proclaimed leaders who conquer corporate peaks through iron-fisted rule, trampling those who get in their way. They mistake being a "boss" for being a leader. The two are quite different and not understanding this distinction is a common mistake among newly emerging leaders. Be a leader not a boss.

In my mind, a leader is one who leads people toward a cause that is far greater than the goal of simply being a good leader. An effective leader "endears" people to their leadership in a way that makes them want to pursue the cause, not simply follow the leader. A boss on the other hand, well, just bosses people around. Leaders endear. Bosses order.

There are very few books on the process of endearing people. Our culture is much more interested in self-promotion than the promotion of the feelings, goals and beliefs of others. Yet, people readily follow a leader who puts those they lead ahead of their own personal needs or trappings of power.

New leaders have a difficult time in believing that the key to becoming an effective leader is to focus on the core needs of others. The legends of powerful corporate leaders scream they should take charge, be big, force your way to the top. Caring more about others than your own position and power seems backwards to the emerging leader. They often believe that by the power now bestowed on them by the organizational chart or some connective power that they have to the others in the upper stratospheres of the company - they have earned the right to lead. We earn the right to lead by endearing people to our leadership. We endear people to our leadership by focusing on their core needs.

I believe that core needs are the same for all people. Whether it is a teenage boy who speaks clumsily about his needs or a spouse, friend, employee - there are two basic needs held by all that if fulfilled, will endear others to your leadership and will deeply engage them in the work of your organization.

The first thing that everyone, regardless of who they are, desires is to be cared for. We all want to have a sense that someone is looking out for our best interest. Caring for others takes on many different faces. Caring involves listening to what they want to accomplish in life. Caring understands who they are as a person and where they have come in life's journey. Caring recognizes their strengths and positions them in the organizations to accomplish the second thing that everyone is looking for - they want to make a difference.

Everyone in life wants to make a difference. A leader puts their team members in a place that they can make a difference. That place allows individuals to execute effectively using their strengths. When an employee understands the role of the organization and is supported in a way that they can support the organizational purpose, they will find fulfillment in their work. Good leaders recognize this need and organize in a way that makes it a reality.

Caring for others and allowing them the opportunity to make a difference are two key leadership traits that enable new leaders to quickly establish themselves as effective leaders in their organization. However, many first time leaders over-complicate the process and believe that it must be more complex than simply endearing others.

New leaders most commonly fail at understanding that genuine leadership is a life-long journey with others and that the true test and demonstration of their leadership skills will come in times of crisis or great challenge.

Leadership is a journey in the sense that we as leaders are always learning, and we learn best in the midst of new circumstances. When we stop being self-aware enough to improve our leadership skills, we move toward tyranny. We are not and will never be perfect people, so we therefore cannot possibly be perfect leaders. Mistakes will happen. Effective leaders are attentive students of their own success and failures. New leaders must have the humility to learn from those they lead.

Challenges then become the proving ground of our leadership abilities to ourselves, other organizational leaders and those we lead. Times of crisis should be embraced as the test of our skills and used as an opportunity to advance in our leadership ability. I know of many instances when new leaders were given increased responsibility or scope immediately after emerging from a crisis situation that demonstrated their ability. New leaders should not shy away from conflict and challenges but rather embrace the opportunity to learn and to be noticed.

Finally, new leaders should be themselves. Far too many developing leaders choose to mimic other leaders. There is certainly room for learning from others, but each leader must nurture their own style. Your leadership style should embrace who you are as well as where

you have come in your journey. A leader who acts like someone they are not will be disingenuous and insincere in their encounters with others. Disingenuous leaders will not be trusted to care for others or help them make a difference. A leader must be trusted by those they lead and that trust resides in knowing the true person. A transparent leader is a trusted leader.

Becoming a new leader can be frightening and overwhelming, but when we approach it as the basic component of caring for others and positioning them to make a difference, the effort is manageable. Take time as a new leader to understand your style. Learn to be a student of the needs of others and you will find you are focused on people and the purpose of your organization rather than on becoming a leader. In the end, less focus on becoming a leader and more focus on those you lead is the secret to becoming a great leader.

Start your journey!