

Fifteen Elements of My Personal Leadership Philosophy

Paul L. Gerhardt, Jr.
OL 602 Self, Systems and Leadership
Dr. Tom Norton
Chapman University

Abstract

Great leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to name just a few, made history, because of the differences they made in American History. Leadership scholars may ask, "What are the characteristics that they had in common?" I am sure that if I could go back in time and study these great men, I could identify many common characteristics and be able to write a book about what makes great leaders great. However I do not have that kind of time for this project. I have, however, developed this personal philosophy of leadership, comprised of fifteen elements, which are derived from my yearlong study of organizational leadership at Chapman University. The elements of my leadership philosophy are very similar to what most of us have learned as children growing up. Much of it is based upon my own experiences. These are the essential elements of effective leadership and are about seeing systems and understanding one's self. These elements are: honesty, integrity, coaching, effective communication, vision, motivation and trust, to name just a few. I believe that with these basic essentials, any person can be a great leader. Utilizing these leadership principles daily, making them a part of whom you are and what you do is the key to success of effective leadership.

Many people have argued that great leaders are great because of whom they are and what they have accomplished. I agree with that only partially, as you will read later in this paper. In order to fully understand the elements of effective leadership, one must study great leaders. Great leaders are either written about and/or are writers themselves. Leadership scholars are leaders themselves too. They create models, theories philosophies that make them great. They teach leaders how to be leaders and students how to teach. Each of us have philosophies about leadership, whether we write it or not. My leadership philosophy has evolved greatly since I first enrolled at Chapman University.

I once believed I was a natural leader having held several elected positions in both my high school and undergraduate years. I have been in management positions since I was seventeen years old, which forced me to be a leader of sorts. Based on this personal history, I knew that I had some essential leadership skills, but never took the time to study the art until I came to Chapman.

I realize now, at the completion of my graduate program studies, that I did have many of the skills and traits that good leaders possess. However, now I understand why they work and have grown leaps and bounds in my leadership philosophy and personal leadership abilities. And, although I may be at the end of my formal studies of leadership, it is the beginning of my education. Because the more I learn, the less I realize that I truly know.

The first essential element to my leadership philosophy is that leadership is all about relationships. Essentially, you cannot be a leader

unless you have followers. Obtaining followership is not always an easy task, but as I will discuss later, leaders must have a vision, must be honest, must know how to communicate his/her vision and must understand that people will not follow unless they can see how it benefits them. Maintaining a relationship with your followers is a daily chore and must not be taken for granted. The dynamics of the leadership role you play can and will quickly evolve and change.

The second aspect of my leadership philosophy is that leaders need to understand the organization's business, operation and goals. Let's face it, how could anybody possibly lead people who perform important functions of the operation if he/she does not understand the processes themselves?

Effective leaders will always have experience (or at least similar experience) working in an organization. The only way around it is to surround yourself with people who do understand the business and can advise you to what will work and what will not. This however, is no substitute for knowing it--yourself.

The third philosophy is about knowledge and diversity of it. Nobody knows everything. Know the strengths and weakness of your organization's members. Know that diversity brings strength; the IQ of a team needs to be higher than any individual. Even though there may be many brilliant people in an organization, if they are not working in a team, then the combined IQ will be less. Also, know what you do not know. Become a master of what you do know, and then learn what you don't. Also, teach the members of your organization to do the same.

Philosophy element number four: Leaders must have a vision and be able to communicate and move followers to understand and “buy into” the vision. Leadership experts will agree that having vision and effective communication skills are the primary characteristics that separate exceptional leaders from everybody else.

Peter Singe touched upon it in his *Fifth Discipline*, leaders must understand and consider how decisions will affect the “big picture” later down the road. Singe referred to it as “the delusion of learning from experience.” I take this a bit further and say that part of being a visionary leader is calculating decisions and not assuming the outcome will always take place as hoped for. Also, have a secondary plan of action ready if things do not work out as planned. You can learn from experience. However, if you assume that because you experienced something once, that it will happen exactly that way again. If you do, you are only fooling yourself. Leadership is about people, and there are far too many variables in personalities and life experiences that affect how people will react. Therefore, don’t count on experience 100 percent.

My personal philosophy element number six is simple. Leaders are teachers and coaches. Understanding that teaching is paramount in leadership--knowing this will take you far. The better you can teach and coach your constituents, the better of a leader you will be.

Everybody knows that communication is an essential key-element to leadership. Good leaders must realize that effective communication means--effective listening FIRST. Don’t assume you understand. Everybody has

different learning and communication styles; don't assume you understand—clarify what you are hearing.

Element eight should really be at the top of this list. I say this because leadership is about people. Element eight is: Everybody deserves respect--treat everyone, as you would have them treat you. Sounds like the Golden Rule, but enhanced?

Respect is truly essential, how can you expect to be respected by those who follow you if you do not first treat each and everyone with respect first? The answer—you can expect it, but what you want and what you will get are two different things!

Element number nine takes respect a little bit further: Leaders must earn and be able to maintain the respect of the followers. Giving symbols of dedication to followers in personal matters is also important. Giving symbols of respect may include taking the time to listen about personal problems a follower may have. Doing something extra like acknowledging work well done, no matter the size of the accomplishment is another example. All people want to feel special and giving symbols of respect, whether it be physical or verbal is extremely important.

My personal leadership philosophy, element number ten deals with trust. Leaders must give trust openly and unquestionably. If leaders give trust, they are therefore, worthy of being trusted back. Giving autonomy to followers is a very crucial part of showing trust to them.

Motivation is a huge part of leadership. Element number eleven is: Followers need to know how it will benefit them. Ownership brings pride and

motivation. Consider this, how willing are you to do a task if there is no benefit for you? Being able to communicate how a task benefits an individual is an art, but necessary. Benefit could be as simple as, "Please do this, I will pay you this amount." Or "If you do this then our team will be this much closer to being number one!"

Elements numbers twelve and thirteen are very closely linked to element number eleven. Element twelve says that, motivation comes from the individual NOT the leader. A leader cannot make a person do anything that they truly do not want to do. They must be motivated from within. This is accomplished by showing them how it will benefit them personally.

Element thirteen takes that a step further: There is enough success for everyone. Every member of the organization must feel important and see how their work benefits the organization as a whole. This element shows followers how his/her action benefits them personally, as it gives their work meaning. This element is very closely linked to Singe's philosophy of, "I am my position." In assuming we are our positions we have little power and little need to take responsibility for poor results. Give followers the "big picture." Reward their performance with effective communication that shows each individual how important his/her work is in the scheme of things.

Other very crucial elements to my leadership philosophy, which should have been at the top of this list because of its importance--is element number fourteen; dealing with honesty and integrity. Honesty and integrity are vital. It not only builds trust, but also yields creativity and sets the tone for followers to model honesty and integrity in their daily performance. A

person may get away with acts of dishonesty and poor-integrity, however, it will always come back in the end and bite them back. Be honest at all times. Nobody is perfect. Admit your faults and learn from them. You will be glad you did.

The last, but certainly not least element of my personal leadership philosophy is: Be organized. Effective leaders make lots of lists. They plan for both long-term and short-term goals, utilizing the talents of the people who surround them for clarification and necessary modification. This is a key element of having and implementing vision. Being organized elicits the same from followers. It clarifies communication and goals, as it benefits the organization—on whole.

My personal leadership philosophy is easy to understand and implement, because most of it is essentially what we have been taught since kindergarten. We need to treat people how we want to be treated. We need to be able to ask for what we need and give others what they need. We need to always say, "Please, thank you and may I" in so many words. Leadership is all about people--leaders and followers. Leadership is about having vision, communication, coaching, motivation respect, understanding the operation's systems and being able to teach others how to make it work.

My leadership philosophy comes from my personal experiences at doing it and also studying it over the past year at Chapman. Once I have an understanding of how it works, I can implement it and teach others to do the same.

I am quite sure that if great leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were alive today--they would attest to three things. First, what they accomplished as leaders of men, occurred because they utilized many of these fifteen elements of leadership. Secondly, they would attest that they never claimed to know everything, but were driven by dedication to making a positive difference only because the people they lead needed them to. Third, they would say, "Leadership is a science of understanding self and being able to see the systems within the organizations in which one leads." I believe that my fifteen elements of leadership will give me the essentials to be a great leader in any organization in which I choose to be a part of.

In conclusion, I leave this thought about leadership to ponder: It is not right to say that leadership achieved by great leaders is memorable because of who they were. Great leadership is about men remembering whom they serve and doing what is right that makes them great.

