

The Ideal Leader

When I first sat down to write my application to UK's Emerging Leader Institute, I was instructed to list five qualities of a good leader. Though I could make educated guesses as to what those five qualities were, I cannot recall any of them with certainty. I do know, however, that most of them had to do with the leader's ability to do something-- to carry out a task, to incite motivation in followers, etc. Throughout the course of the semester, I found that there was much more to being a leader than practical skills or even practical behaviors, and even that there was more to leadership than the qualities of the leader, as the followers play a large role as well. Now that I have taken the course, I would like to discuss is my newfound philosophy on leadership, displayed through five main qualities that I believe that not just every good leader, but every *ideal* leader, should have.

The first of these qualities is imagination. This is not to be confused with pursuit of a vision, as it is very possible for one to pursue a vision that is not very imaginative. For example, the new president of a company might hearken back to the old president, observing how well productivity and profit flourished under his leadership, and pattern his objectives for the year after the old way. But there is always room for improvement-- he needs to take what he has learned from the former leader and add to it, to see if he can make the company even better. A leader needs to be able to challenge norms, to think outside of the box, and formulate an effective end product in his (or her) mind that the group can work toward. This may involve brainstorming for many hours, assessing goals, and most definitely discussing topics with group members for other ideas and feedback. Pursuit of a vision ensures that something gets done, but

pursuit of an imaginative vision ensures that something great gets done. C.S. Lewis, who is one of my favorite leaders because he had such an influence on his readers, once said to “Aim for heaven, and you get earth thrown in. Aim for earth, and you get neither.” Though he was referring to the spiritual, this philosophy aligns well with my view on leadership goals. If a leader has a safe, normal, ordinary vision (analogous with earth), he will achieve little more, or perhaps even less, than what has been done in the past. But if he has grand dreams (analogous with heaven), he is almost sure to get a grand product, even if it does not quite match what he had imagined.

I experienced this concept firsthand through the development of my own leadership project. At the outset, I had imagined hundreds of UK Students partnering up with hundreds of needy children and giving them friendship and financial support. It was to be a local Adopt-A-Child venture of sorts, where all those willing to “adopt” would, and the rest would give money or time spent fixing up the MASH House, a local youth shelter in Lexington where the children stay. I had imagined wonderful results, and set out right away to make it possible, but soon realized that I could not make my dream a reality. I did, however, end up achieving the more realistic goal of organizing a clothing drive for the children which, though not as exciting, was helpful and reasonable. In aiming for the stars, I did reach the sky, and I am glad of it.

The second quality an ideal leader should possess is prudence. Known as one of the four cardinal virtues, it is defined as “the correct knowledge of things to be done and avoided,” and also essentially involves examining decisions both within and with others, making sound judgments from the evidence and resources at hand, and carrying out activities based upon those prior judgments. An ideal leader should do all the investigation, research, and collaborating necessary to find out exactly what needs to be done (and not done), and should also use his

knowledge and wisdom to discern the best way to do it. For example, in one of my favorite novels, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, an arrogant missionary goes to Africa to try to convert the people of a small village. But he doesn't take the time to find out about their culture and what they will respond to, so instead of getting to know them and helping them, he ends up making a fool of himself by misusing their language and scoffing at their customs. In the same way, an ideal leader should examine an issue from all aspects and consider it from as many points of view as possible before deciding upon a course of action.

I had to exercise prudence as I hit the roadblocks for my project, in discovering that the tax exempt number for the MASH house would remain an enigma, I searched for other outlets and ways to help. One way in which I could have stood to be more prudent would have been to make sure I was allowed to place donation requests in the mailboxes of my dorm residents before wasting the time, effort, and money required to prepare the letters, as I later found it was considered soliciting and against the rules. Even in this situation, I learned the valuable lesson that you can never be too prudent; in the former case I was not prudent enough. In the future, I will make sure to verify the viability of my aims.

The third characteristic is determination. After formulating an imaginative vision and deciding upon how best to carry it out, it is very important that a leader sees it through to fruition. Without determination, a project could end up losing steam, or failing altogether, and if the leader doesn't have an attitude of energy and perseverance, he cannot expect his followers to. Determination helps maintain focus and keeps discouragement at bay so that the end product triumphs. For example, if Martin Luther King, Jr. had given up in the face discrimination, mockery, and even imprisonment, our country may not have the civil rights it has today. The ultimate measure of a man," he says, "is not where he stands in moments of comfort and

convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” If all goes well for a leader and he does a good job, then he can certainly be praised for it. But an ideal leader is one who does just as well in the face of opposition and hardship.

I faced lots of opposition with my project, not only through the failed attempt at the letters and the tax exempt number, but through a general lack of interest on the parts of others, confidentiality issues with kids staying at the MASH House, extensive paperwork for volunteers, the inability to get an offering from the church, and even my lack of a car. Though I was discouraged at times, determination, as well as encouragement from an instructor, guided me to the option that did work, and I appreciate the effort more now than I would have if everything had gone smoothly from the beginning.

Another important trait of an ideal leader is morality. This is especially something I did not consider when writing my original essay on leadership; I suppose I would have seen it as too abstract (and for some, objective) a concept. Morality is undoubtedly unnecessary for a good leader, as we would probably all agree that people like Hitler and Stalin were good leaders in that they did their jobs well, but they failed to be ideal leaders because they were so immoral and oppressive. A leader of an organization can fight his way to the top by shooting others down, seeking glory for himself, and even engaging in shady dealings with money. But an ideal leader is one who puts the needs of others above his own needs, treats everyone fairly, and acts in a morally upright fashion, earning the respect and admiration that would most likely place him near the top anyhow.

I didn't get many chances to display (or even fail to display) good morals with my project, as most of the objectives were pretty cut and dry. But I believe that the nature of the entire Emerging Leader Institute's efforts is moral because they seek to help those in need and

bring about a better society, as opposed to working toward selfish or malignant goals. The very fact that we are making a difference in the community through basic needs, manual labor, and even information is a very humble, noble thing-- a perfect example of the golden rule.

Last, but not least, is kindness. It is possible for a leader to undertake an innovative, well-planned, focused, moral venture for the wrong reasons-- simply in order to get the job done or to make a name for himself. A leader can even perform many moral acts not because he is kind, but because he wants recognition or because his conscience will nag at him if he does not. A truly ideal leader is fueled by the goodness of his heart and the practice of doing the right thing because he wants to, instead of just because he needs to. Mother Theresa is venerated today not because of her practical leadership skills or because she wanted to become famous (most would agree that this was of no consequence to her), but that she truly cared about helping people.

Another aspect of kindness lies in a leader's relationship with his followers, in whether he treats them as instruments used to carry out the goal at all costs or human beings with needs of their own. For example, a boss at a company may really need a project done, and have a full right to call an employee in on a weekend to do it. But if he knows that that employee's son has a baseball game that day and chooses to do the project himself, he is showing kindness to the man not only by letting him be with his family, but by taking on the responsibility himself.

One of the reasons my project was a success was that I knew that ultimately, no matter how it got done, I wanted to put smiles on the faces of children. I recognize this kindness in myself and those who helped me, but even more outstanding in my mind is that of my instructors toward me when I had an event I wanted to attend. They had every right not to let me go, as I was on their time and had committed to them first, but because they realized how important it was to me, they offered me a bit of grace and exercised exceeding kindness in making the

allowance.

There are many more traits that an ideal leader should possess, but if he has these, then he can hardly go wrong.