

THE KEYS TO LEADING

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Contemplating the current literature on leadership, an old Sufi teaching story comes to mind:

A man was walking down a dark street when he saw Nasrudin standing under a streetlamp, staring at the ground. The man called out: "What are you doing?" Nasrudin replied: "Looking for my keys."

The man joined in the search. After five minutes of fruitless effort, he asked Nasrudin: "Where did you last have your keys in your hands?" Nasrudin pointed to a dark alley. The man asked: "If you lost your keys in the alley, why are you looking for them here?"

Nasrudin replied: "The light's better here."

In seeking to understand effective leadership, I'm afraid we too often act like Nasrudin: we look where we can see most easily, and therefore (forgive the pun) don't find the keys.

Robert Quinn's 2005 HBR article ("Moments of Greatness: Entering the Fundamental State of Leadership") is a good case in point. His article offers some good reminders and operating principles for leaders. Quinn suggests that leaders "venture beyond familiar territory to pursue ambitious new outcomes" rather than continuing to "stick with what I know." He suggests that leaders "behave according to my values" instead of "complying with other's wishes in an effort to keep the peace." He tells leaders that if they "place my interests above those of the group" they will be less successful than if they "put the collective good first." Finally, he admonishes leaders to "learn from my environment and recognize when there's a need for change" instead of "blocking out external stimuli in order to stay on task and avoid risk." Sound advice, all, and if heard at the right time, useful.

But Quinn takes these points much, much further. Specifically, Quinn suggests that his four favored bits of advice together actually comprise a specific state – the "fundamental state of leadership" – which, if you can just enter it, will make you capable of "moments of greatness" as a leader. He makes a spot-on point at the beginning of his article, that "Nearly all corporate training programs and books on leadership are grounded in the assumption that we should study the

behaviors of those who have been successful and teach people to emulate them” and then goes on to assert that it’s not these specific *traits* of the leader that make them effective, but rather a specific *state* of the leader – the “fundamental state.” In doing so, Quinn falls into the major trap facing authors who would be helpful to leaders: he looks in the wrong place for the keys to leading. It’s not that Quinn has identified the wrong “fundamental” state; it’s that *no* state, fundamental, or not, is the key to leading.

If I could send a single message to someone who wanted to improve their success at leading, it would be this: Essentially, fundamentally

Leading is NOT about you.

Leading is not fundamentally about *you* – your vision, your voice, your skills, behaviors, experience, strengths, weaknesses or states. These are all important factors to consider; they all have an impact on how you lead and the effectiveness of your leading; but focusing on *you* will not show you what you need to see in order to lead effectively. You won’t find the keys to leadership in that light.

So if leading is not about *you*, leading must be about *them* – the followers. It’s about their efforts, their commitment, their needs and wants and motivations – right? Again, these are important factors, but again, they are not where you will find the keys to leading, because essentially, fundamentally

Leading is NOT about them, either.

Leading is about us.

Leading is taking active responsibility for making it possible for others to make their contribution to the mutual endeavor. Leading is about a community of interests, a group of people who share a view of the world and who act individually and together to create specific value in that world, who are engaged in a mutual endeavor that creates value over and above what each can create independently, and who are committed to making their contribution to that endeavor. To lead is to pay attention fundamentally to that community of interests, to the mutual endeavor and each person’s contribution to it. To lead is to provide *whatever is needed* to make the contributions, and therefore the value creation, possible. That is the leader’s contribution to the mutual endeavor.

So what does the leader do, specifically? The leader does *whatever is needed* to make it possible for *us* to create the value we are committed to creating. Perhaps you need to resolve our differing views of what that value looks like. Perhaps you need to get us on the same page regarding what our customers need, or how we intend to compete in a crowded marketplace. Perhaps you need to build our belief that we can in fact achieve this goal, or overcome these obstacles. Perhaps you need to reassure us about the course we are following, or shake us up to see that the course we are following won’t get us there, or ... There are no simple answers because the answer fundamentally depends on who *we* actually are, and what our mutual endeavor actually is.

A current TV commercial shows people caught in some nasty complex reality of business: a paper jam in the copier, gnarly shipping challenges, etc. Someone reminds them that they have an “Easy” button; they push the button and everything works out. The absurdity of the solution is part of the commercial’s charm – sure, we recognize our desire for an “Easy” button, but we know they are none in real life. Communities of interest, mutual endeavors, committed participation and contribution to creating value – this is complex stuff, and no amount of wishing for simple answers will change that.

As people who seek to support the success of leaders, we have a choice to make. We can either respond to their genuine desire for easily understood solutions – “How do I need to be and what do I need to do in order to be an effective leader?” – and thereby join them in looking under the streetlamp. Or else we can help them see the true complexity of their actual situation, in ways that lead to specific, tailored ways of leading.

I propose we commit to keeping the full complexity in the picture. It’s not as easy to see as under the streetlamp – but, after all, that is where the keys are.