

Nine Axioms for Leadership

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I believe that there are certain characteristics and human qualities which distinguish successful leaders. I call these my “Axioms for Leadership.”

Axiom (1) is that the secret of getting things done is in getting things started. I am always surprised at the number of people who cannot seem to get a project underway. Yet, starting is 90% of completion.

Axiom (2) is that leaders are action oriented. They speak when they must and they do that well but their actions speak even more loudly than their words.

Axiom (3) is that leaders are not only willing to take on responsibility themselves but are also prone to involve others in bringing their action to successful fruition without selfish intent to claim all the credit as personal. They function as team leaders.

Axiom (4) is that leaders have a sense of anticipation. This is vision, fueled by dreams of what might be, clothed in the garments of practical application of energy, and related to plans of how something can be taken from where it is to where it ought to be.

Axiom (5) is that leaders think big and act boldly. They agree with Charles Moore and “make no little plans which have no magic to stir men’s blood and which they alone will likely not be realized.”

Axiom (6) is that leaders have courage which is based upon commitment and conviction. Thomas Jefferson said to General George Rogers Clark when he was being viciously slandered, “If you meant to escape malice you should have confined yourself to the sleepy life of regular duty.” The passive life of a follower can be much more placid than the sometimes turbulent waters of leadership.

Axiom (7) is that leaders have strong sense of purpose. They believe in something and act on that belief. Someone said, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” An old Spanish proverb says, “If you would be pope, you must think of nothing else.”

Axiom (8) is that leaders tend to have positive attitudes. In fact, leadership is probably 99% attitude. There is a tendency on the part of leaders to be optimistic,

full of hope, and capable of instilling others with a similar spirit. Leaders believe that the world steps aside to let those pass who know where they are going.

Axiom (9) is that leaders tend to assume capabilities and develop competencies which might not have been realized from past experience and preparation. They accept Shakespeare's admonition, "Assume a virtue though you have it not, knowing that the dynamic power of habit will bring it into your character."

In a nutshell, I have suggested in these axioms that leadership requires "the courage to dream, the ability to organize and the strength to execute." If you believe your job cannot be done, the leadership of your organization needs changing. If you are what I have suggested, and to the extent that your organization is willing to invest in good leadership, it will likely be able to afford the investment it makes in you.

Leaders must face up to problems. They must have the courage of their convictions and they must be inspired, optimistic and enthusiastic. Leaders must have knowledge of planning, the capacity to delegate, and the ability to judge their colleagues. They must understand management and finance, have good communication skills and embody the spirit of anticipation. Leaders must be able to set goals and play a strong role in their implementation.

And finally, in concert with the concluding passage of Tennyson's "Ulysses" leaders must dig in their heels, set their sights on the future, and believe they can become what they are determined to be:

*Said the old Soldier and Warrior:
Come, my friends.
'Tis not too late to seek a new world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
- One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

This should be the spirit of the leaders of the future.

Obviously, leadership embodies being prepared to face any problem and to take advantage of every opportunity if they are to be most effective in service to mankind. And in this spirit there is great reward. Edwin Markham said it well -

*There is a destiny that makes us brothers
None goes his way alone
All that we send into the lives of others
Comes back into our own.*

This is the reward which is a part of the essence of the best that leadership opportunity has to offer.