

On Being A Great Leader – A New Model of Leadership

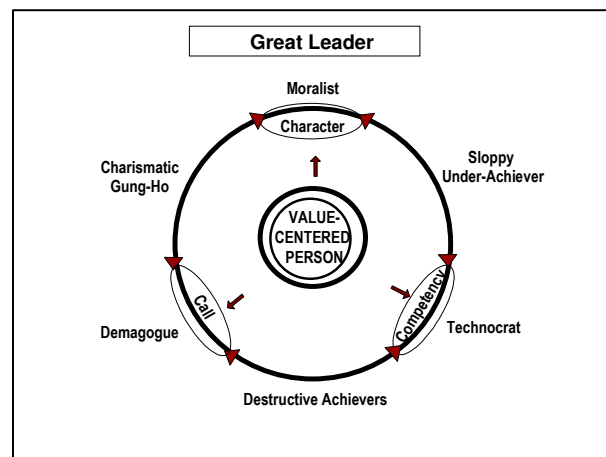
“Leaders thrive by understanding who they are and what they value, by becoming aware of unhealthy blind spots or weaknesses that can derail them, and by cultivating the habit of continuous self-reflection and learning.” Chris Lowney, Heroic Leadershipⁱ

The subject of great leadership surfaced again when we in Singapore were confronted with the recent National Kidney Foundation saga.

I was perplexed by the almost contrasting responses of two groups of people. On the one hand, there were NKF’s board, staff, and supporters who felt that its CEO Mr T.T. Durai was a good leader. On the other hand, there were others who felt otherwise, questioning his integrity.

The difference in perceptions is due to the difference in the criteria in assessing what makes a great leader. There is a distinct difference between being a successful and great leader. Mr Durai may be a successful leader in terms of passion, competence and performance. But he lacks something that makes him an outstanding leader.

I would like to propose a model of great leadership, comprising of four critical components: Centeredness, Calling, Competence and Character.



1. Centeredness

Great leaders are centered. They center their leadership in strong values. Values served as gyroscope and thermostat to guide them in their decision-making and their behaviors.

The ‘Who’ is more important than the ‘What’. The ‘Being’ comes before the ‘Doing’. The values you hold determines the way you lead. There are four important aspects to value.

- a. Values must be nurtured.
- b. Values are nurtured by living them out.
- c. Values are best seen in our behaviors.
- d. Values will be tested.

Some of the most fundamental values that have been critical in leadership are: respect for human dignity, courage, humility, thrift, honesty, learning spirit, and spirit of generosity.

2. Calling

Calling refers to the passion. Stephen Covey calls it, "Finding your own voice."ⁱⁱ It is finding purpose, meaning and fulfillment in life. Calling creates passion. It means understanding yourself, your passion, and your destiny.

Calling has that God-given ability to do the job and God-given enjoyment in doing it. You have a passion in doing it. Of course, passion can be dissipated and has to be nurtured to keep its flame from burning.

Michael Novak, in his best selling book, *Business as a Calling*, describes four characteristics of a calling.ⁱⁱⁱ

- A calling is unique to you. You find yourself. It is self-knowledge, self-identity, and self-fulfillment.
- A calling requires talent. According to Logan Pearsall Smith, "The test of a vocation is love of drudgery it involves."^{iv}
- A calling reveals its presence by the enjoyment and sense of renewed energies its practice yields us.
- A calling is not easy to uncover.

3. Competency

Competency is the accumulation of knowledge and skills in what you do. It is both professional competency and leadership competency. It is both hard and soft skills.

Hard skills have to do with the business or technical aspect of the business. If you are a leader in the banking industry, you need the banking expertise. If you are in retail, you need retail knowledge and understanding of what makes a good retail outlet. You must be familiar or at least have a working knowledge of the business.

But technical or professional knowledge is incomplete and insufficient, we need the softer aspect of leadership, which may include a combination of these: Focus Drive, Developing Others, Strategic Orientation, Conceptual Thinking, Customer Service Orientation, and Team Leadership.

4. Character

James Q. Wilson argues that there is a "growing awareness that a variety of public problems can only be understood – and perhaps addressed – if they are seen as arising out of a defect in character formation."^v

Character is especially critical in leadership. As Os Guinness writes, "Externally, character provides the point of trust that links leaders with followers; internally, character is the part-gyroscope, part-brake that provides the leaders' strongest source of bearings and restraints. In many instances, the first prompting to do good and the last barrier against doing wrong are the same – character."^{vi}

Character has two aspects: Integrity and Morality.

This, I believe, is the missing gap in most leadership development. Look at most of the secular leadership programs today, there is preponderance of emphasis in competency and performance, without the character to serve as gyroscope and thermostat.

Each of these four aspects is important. Allow me to articulate what I mean.

If you have calling, without competence & character, we become demagogue - political agitators appealing to mob instincts.

If we have competence, without calling & character, we become technocrats - functional experts bereft of emotional intelligence.

If we only have character, without calling & competence, we become moralists - dispensing spiritual advice and moral platitudes to our followers, with little credibility because we lack passion and competence in our leadership.

If we have calling & competence, without character, we become destructive achievers. I am sure you have seen too many examples of this kind of leader, who have suffered this fate. This is true both in the west & east, both in the profit & non-profit, both in government and marketplace, both in the pulpit & the pew.

I believe this is the distinct difference between successful & great leader.

If we have character & competence, without calling, we become demotivated under-achievers.

If we have character & calling without competence, we become charismatic gung-ho. We are 'eager-beavers' but unable to lead our organizations forward.

Centeredness, Calling, Competence, and Character: We cannot perceive these as techniques or strategies but four perspectives forming one way of living and leading. All these factors are important.

No great leader can be great by ignoring any one. The real power of greatness lies not in the sum of the four aspects but in what results when all these factors reinforce one another in an integrated life.

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ⁱ Lowney, C. 2003. Heroic Leadership. Loyola Press, Chicago, USA.

ⁱⁱ Covey, S.R. 2004. The 8th Habit. Simon & Schuster. New York, New York, USA.

ⁱⁱⁱ Novak, M. 1996. Business As A Calling. The Free Press, New York, New York, USA.

^{iv} Novak, M. 1996. Business As A Calling. The Free Press, New York, New York, USA.

^v Guinness, O. 1999. Character Counts. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

^{vi} Guinness, O. 1999. Character Counts. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.