

When You View Leadership as Art: The Implications

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In last week's podcast, we looked at leadership through the lens of the definition which I developed 20 years ago when I was writing the first edition of my book, *Leadership and the Power of Trust*. Last week, we focused on two words from the definition. Today, I want to look at an additional concept which the definition highlights.

For the benefit of those who may not have heard the previous episode yet, let me restate the definition and briefly recap my points from last week's program.

I define leadership as the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it. I chose this wording to offer a definition which accurately describes a leader's role wherever leadership is exercised, from neighborhood organizations to the C-suite of global giants.

As we explored that definition in the previous podcast, I zeroed in on the words "people" and "shared purpose." I suggested that they serve as the two anchor points for all effective leadership. That is to say, with the myriad of things competing for their attention, leaders must prioritize their focus on their people and on the orchestrating purpose which they are jointly pursuing.

Now let's move to another which appears early in the definition, the word "art": leadership is the *art* of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing to achieve it. Why the word "art"? Because we have no other word in English which more fully expresses the essence of how leadership is practiced.

Consider how artists – painters, for instance – go about their work. They can execute their art on a variety of substrates: canvas, paper, wood, stone, leather, metal – even human bodies! And they can choose from an equally varied number of painting media: oils, water colors, acrylics, charcoal, pastels, or pen and ink. Dependent on the substrate, some painting media are more appropriate than others.

Moreover, the techniques for working with pastels differ from the techniques for working in oils. The process for prepping the painting surface changes from substrate to substrate. In other words, as an art form, painting entails no small number of variables. The art is knowing how to utilize specific media on specific substrates to achieve a desired creative outcome.

Yet, with all of these variations in material and methodology, certain principles remain constant. The laws of perspective are the same, whatever the substrate or medium. The complementary color wheel remains the same, whatever the application.

Something similar can be said of leadership. Leaders work with tremendous varieties of people and an endless array of contexts. Yet, certain principles of leadership hold true, regardless of the context and the people around the leader. The art of leading is knowing how to fine tune the unchanging principles of leadership so that they are utilized appropriately with a unique group of people in a distinct context.

But because leadership is like an art, judgments about how well it is performed are quite subjective. If leadership were a science, it could be evaluated more objectively. There would be rigorous methodologies and protocols to follow. Objective standards and verification would need to be met. Outcomes would be subject to quantitative analysis. Contrast that to an artist, whose work is judged purely on a subjective basis. Some people will like it, others will not.

The work of a leader is judged the same way. Opinions may vary widely as to whether the leader did his or her job well or did it poorly. That's why leaders must have a secure sense of self, so that they remain confident of their decisions and direction, even when attacked by vociferous critics. Artists don't quit painting just because some art critic writes a scathing review. Leaders must maintain a similar resilience. They must not be cowed by people who second guess their leadership.

Now, I'm not saying that leaders should be oblivious to criticism or dismissive of their critics. Sometimes a critique raises issues that deserve the leader's consideration. But neither should leaders be paralyzed by criticism.

Forty years ago I had an extended friendship with a courageous, internationally-renowned Spanish journalist who openly advocated positions which triggered outspoken political and social opposition. I asked him once how he weathered the scorching criticism which was regularly heaped upon him. He said, "I just think of a scene from Don Quixote, where he and his servant Sancho Panza are secretly making their way through dark backstreets at night, on their way to another of Quixote's adventures. And Sancho Panza says, 'Master, we must stop. The dogs are barking.'"

I chuckled and immediately thought of another scene in which a leader who was being derided was able to take it in stride and with humor. The event occurred in the mid-1960s, when I was on active duty at the Dallas Naval Air Station as an enlisted man. One of my collateral duties was to lead the Navy color guard which appeared in parades and at other public events. In the fall and winter, one of our regular appearances was at Cowboy football games, which in those days were still played in the Cotton Bowl.

Don Meredith was the Cowboy's quarterback at the time. And one night, Meredith and his go-to receiver Buddy Dial were having a horrid game. There was one missed or bobbled pass after another. The fans were restless.

Toward the end of the second quarter, I was gathered with the color guard near the Cowboys' bench preparing to go onto the field for a half-time program. Shortly after we took up our allotted spot, the Cowboys turned over the ball on downs again. As Meredith started off of the field, the stands erupted in boos. From behind me I could hear people shouting all sorts of ugly insults.

Meredith, meanwhile, was approaching the sideline about where we were standing. As he neared the edge of the playing field, he removed his helmet, looked up at the sky, and said in his East Texas drawl, “Forgive them. They don’t know why you sent me.”

That picture has forever remained etched in my mind. His tone wasn’t arrogant. It wasn’t derisive of the fans. It was a simple acknowledgement that as the leader on the field, he was an easy target for those quick to criticize. But his sense of self was strong enough that he could use humor to deflect what, to a less secure person, might have been a deflating attack.

What Meredith apparently understood was that when things do not go the way that people want, the easiest person to blame is the leader. No one needed to tell Meredith that the performance on the field was subpar. He was a professional. He knew that. But he also knew that poor team performance is not due to what one particular person is or is not doing. Yet, as the quarterback – the ostensible leader on the field – he had to expect the bulk of the onus when things went wrong. That’s simply the way it is with leadership.

And in football, the tendency to dump on the leader is particularly strong. Have you ever noticed that fans who boo the offense when it leaves the field rarely boo the defense, even when it’s scored on repeatedly? What accounts for that? I think it’s because the leader on the offensive side of the line is clearly identified. He’s visibly running the show. As for the defense, only the most diehard fans know who the defensive leader is. Play-callers on defense are not so obvious. Fans therefore don’t have a specific individual on whom to vent frustration with the defense. So they heap all of their frustration on the quarterback, including spillover frustration with the defense.

The fact of the matter is, the leader tends to receive an undue amount of the praise when things go well and an undue amount of the blame when things go poorly. As a consequence, leaders must always take what is said of them with a grain of salt. They must not let praise inflate their ego nor let criticism deflate their self-confidence.

Leadership is thus not for people who feel driven to win popularity contests. You’ve seen those people. They are in a position of responsibility which calls for them to lead. But they seem to test the wind of popular opinion continually to determine which way it’s blowing, then they go with the flow. They need the constant approval of others in order to feel good about themselves.

They have not yet learned how to “take the vote back inside,” as I like to say. Let me explain. We all come into this world heavily dependent on how others treat us in order to feel worthwhile. Even as infants, we register the degree to which the world feeds us when we are hungry, comforts us when we are upset, cleans us when we are dirty. Our sense of self-worth thus resides entirely in how other people treat us. It’s their vote which determines how resilient our sense of self is.

Maturity, in my judgment, is the process of reclaiming that vote for ourselves – developing a sense of self-worth that is determined by our own judgment, not the judgment of the world. That’s what I refer to when I speak of taking the self-worth vote back inside.

Jesus once asked his adversaries, “Which of the prophets did you not persecute and kill?” The reality he pointed to can be broadened to describe the world in general. In every age, human society has a poor record of recognizing genuinely great people who appear in their midst.

That's why so many artists whom we admire today, never attained widespread acclaim and praise during their lifetime. It's why in hindsight, history often admires men and women whose pioneering ideas and leadership contributions went unheralded, unappreciated, or even openly opposed while they were alive.

Had we formed our opinion of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 based on newspaper editorials north and south, we would have never expected him to be remembered as one of our two greatest presidents. He was despised in the South because he wanted to free slaves. In the North he was equally despised because he proposed that any emancipation process should include transitional economic subsidies to Southern landowners to ease the financial blow of losing forced labor. To the South, he was a sellout to the abolitionists. To the North, he was a sellout to the slaveholders.

In short, Lincoln is an illustrative case study of the vulnerability of leaders to criticism. If they've not taken their self-worth vote back inside, criticism can be withering. Neither artists nor leaders can lose faith in themselves, just because popularity eludes them. They both must be able to maintain faith in themselves and their vision of what they seek to accomplish, whatever the tide of popularity.

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