

## **Personal Leadership**

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I have been a student of “leadership” in one form or another nearly all my life although formally for the past 15 years. In the beginning of my exploration of this often studied, but not yet fully understood relationship dynamic, my perspective on leadership was limited to the study of positions that came with title and authority. This is the type of leadership that my formal education was based on, and where I devoted a great deal of time and energy attempting to apply what I had learned.

After several years of study and direct application of new learnings I realized that I still understood very little about what makes effective leaders effective. How is it that some are able to influence and capture the hearts of peers and colleagues while the actions of others appear to deepen the chasm that already exists between leaders and followers, and members of communities? This question unsettled me and encouraged me to look at leadership through a completely different lens – a lens I refer to as “personal leadership.”

Personal leadership is the type of leadership that we *all* possess. It is what dictates our thoughts, which in turn dictate our behavior and actions. It is seen by others as the quality of our character. It manifests itself in the ways that we “show up” on a consistent basis – whether that be content, peaceful, kind and compassionate or boastful, judgmental, bitter and angry. Powerful personal leadership takes place when we are still long enough to feel the strength of our own presence and our true nature, and we allow that inner strength to guide our daily interactions.

Until recently I’ve thought of these two perspectives on leadership as mutually exclusive; one is a more academic based view, the other a more spiritual, personal growth based view. Slowly, over time, these two have started to blend together to the point where I realize that you cannot look at one without considering the other. One cannot truly serve effectively in a formal leadership position without some degree of personal leadership. In fact, many formal leadership positions serve as the gateway to developing personal leadership skills. This is why you may hear people say as they vacate leadership positions “I have learned so much” or “This has been quite the journey.” Serving in formal leadership positions for many is a journey into oneself!

Recently I facilitated a leadership panel discussion. The panel was comprised of individuals serving in leadership positions on a national, regional and state level. When asked what, if any, formal leadership training they had received, each basically said very little to none. Those in attendance were surprised; their perspective was that those who are in positions of influence must be where they are because they have been trained to be there. In thinking about this further an analogy came to mind.

Current leaders are much like first and second generation interpreters; they were selected, raised in the field and trained by their own. It is only recently that the study of leadership has become formalized in the field of interpreting. Prior to a more formal approach, information, rules for interaction and the “culture” of the field of interpreting and leadership within were passed down through observation and in-group mentoring. While this was a necessary step in our evolution, and one that served us for many years, I offer the following as a way to help us understand true leadership in our field going forward.

I believe that those who were selected by members of the community as potential leaders were those who stood out as individuals possessing the *personal leadership* attributes necessary for group success. These necessary attributes may have changed over the years as our collective needs have changed, but what remains static is that leaders have been called out in large part due to the quality of their character. Going back to the panelists, each mentioned that they entered positions of service primarily as a result of others taking note of their abilities. While they may not have been exposed to leadership paradigms in a formal manner, one thing that they all possessed, and continue to hone, is a high degree of personal leadership.

Personal leadership is something that develops over time for all of us. It develops as a result of looking within. The process of serving in a formal leadership position simply seems to force acceleration of the process. Formal leadership provides an opportunity to come face to face with your own character. It develops abilities such as standing in your own truth while honoring another's, listening authentically and with a true desire to understand another's heart, electing to be happy rather than right, recognizing that encouraging the success of others lifts us all, and knowing that, as Marianne Williamson suggests, when we light our own light we unconsciously help others to light theirs. In my heart, this is how we truly, powerfully and most effectively influence – or lead - one another.

We all have personal leadership ability, and while not all of us elect to develop it through service in a formal leadership role, make no mistake...we are all leaders, to someone.

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