

# Great Leadership includes being yourself!



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Much is written about being a good leader. So much, in fact, that one could be forgiven for believing that a good leader would preferably be both superhuman and a speed-reader to keep up with the latest leadership theories. I do not believe that you have to be superhuman or a speed-reader to become a good leader. This short (time-saving!) white paper explains why I believe this.

Before I start, just to be clear, it is perhaps true that there are a few great leaders who are either naturally talented and/or are in the right place at the right moment to exercise their particular brand of leadership – for example, Napoleon Bonaparte, Sir Winston Churchill, Florence Nightingale, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. These great leaders are interesting to study – and can help to inform the development of your personal leadership skills – as long as you ensure that you are not overwhelmed by their leadership style and/or you are not trying to find some form of quick recipe for leadership. There is no one right way of leading.

Additionally, trying to be someone you are not will cause more problems than it solves, as discussed later in this paper – authenticity is crucial to being a good leader. One of the best ways to become a good leader is to develop into the kind of leader that suits your interests, values, circumstances and personality. If you start from this point, you are well on your way to becoming a good leader. If you start from the perspective that there is one right way to lead, trouble is likely to be just round the corner.

Good leaders generally have an interest in people. To reinforce this point for yourself, it is worth generating a list of words, characteristics and ideas you might associate with good leaders. It would be surprising if your list did not include at least some of the following: strategy; vision; direction; empowering; encouraging of a culture that supports the work of the organisation; a good communicator; a role model; the public face of the organisation; personally credible; courageous; influential; tenacious; energetic; an arbiter; a reference point; an orator; a decision-maker – to name but a few possibilities.

As you think about these words, it becomes clear that many have a people dimension and this is where good leadership comes into play. Good leadership is inextricably linked to the impact that people make in the workplace. It is about galvanising and unifying activities. You cannot lead inanimate objects like computers, desks or offices – you can only lead people.

In order to better understand your predisposition for leadership, carry out the following task. Think about a past, one-off work event that you particularly enjoyed. Run through this event in your mind, then write down a few words to describe what you were enjoying. If your example turns out to be primarily concerned with things or processes, rather than when you were leading, or being part of, a successful team, then a leadership role is unlikely to be a natural choice for you and becoming a good leader may be hard. Being interested in things or processes is not a natural springboard to securing the best possible future through the alignment, commitment and talent of the people within the organisation – although it is not impossible. As Marcus Buckingham (2005) says, play to your strengths and you will be successful. If being a technical expert is your thing then that's great – the world of work needs expertise.

If your response to the one-off work event that you particularly enjoyed does involve people and teamworking and you are, for example, using phrases like 'when we...' or 'when the team...', then leadership is likely to be a more natural option for you. If this is the case, then what is the balance required of a good leader? Here, I take balance to mean the ability to adapt one's behaviour as required. For example, no single behaviour or business activity is considered the answer to all problems. So, in the case of your behaviour, how can you build up your confidence and leadership ability so that you know:

- when to speak and when to listen
- when to direct and when to coach
- how to be driven but humble
- how and when to exercise the proverbial 'iron glove' that Napoleon Bonaparte talked about
- how to be optimistic but pragmatic
- how to be strategic but in touch with people's current issues
- how to enable business as usual while moving towards a different future?

We all have biases and preferences and if we take the trouble to recognise them, as Einstein said, we can become the change we seek and by so doing, deliver that change. The key, of course, to being a balanced leader is to ensure that we understand those biases and preferences – that we have self-knowledge. There are many ways to understand ourselves better – people who know us outside of work and close friends and family will often be good places to start to further develop our understanding of ourselves. Other options for generating self-knowledge include talking with colleagues, completing psychometrics and 360-degree feedback instruments, coaching, development programmes, neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and experience that is reflected upon and learnt from.

Hand in hand with knowing what we are like is accepting this and appreciating that connecting with people is the key to leadership and that this can be done in many ways, quietly or more loudly, from in front or from behind. Accepting this and accepting oneself 'warts and all' is a great platform for becoming the best leader you can become. If you are not sure about this point, watch the entertaining film called *Charlie Wilson's War*, starring Tom Hanks, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Julia Roberts. It is the story of a man who was generally regarded as a likeable but ineffective 'good-time Charlie', swanning affably around the US House of Representatives. The reality was that Charlie Wilson quietly and spectacularly changed the course of the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, while also being 'good-time Charlie'. In this witty and unorthodox film, we see how Charlie's network, contacts and his genuine interest in people gave him some much-needed leverage.

We are all the sum of our best and worst characteristics. Trying to be the perfect human being is much more likely to be damaging to oneself and those around us, rather than simply accepting that we can do great work while being flawed and not trying to hide those flaws. For example, I sometimes wish that attention to detail was part of the way I process the world, but it isn't and no matter how hard I try, details will elude me, as they did when I arrived at Heathrow airport one morning, delighted that I had remembered to bring my passport at such an early hour, only to find that passport control would not let me fly to Holland on my then 9-year-old son's passport. The passport official could not help but see the funny side of me trying to pose as a 9-year-old boy...

There are many ways to lead and to lead very successfully. It is a question of which way is best for you and how you can continue to play to your strengths while being balanced, especially being balanced by others who have the skills that may not be natural to you. Above all, be authentic and congruent. This can be achieved more easily than you might think by remembering how you feel when you are talking to someone who does not 'ring true' and/or when working with someone when you cannot anticipate from one minute to the next the behaviours they are likely to exhibit. Good leaders need to give of themselves. How do you respond to someone who gives little away? Naturally, we tend to match this behaviour and end up having little or no connection with such a person – the opposite of great leadership. If you cannot connect with people, it's difficult to know how you will influence them to create a successful future.

Some final thoughts... Do you feel good about being a leader in your current context? Does it fit with your personal values? Can you see a route from where you are now to where you would like to be in, say, 5 years? Sometimes we rise to leadership by a planned process, sometimes we are thrust into a leadership role by circumstances. This can be a wonderful way to become a good leader, because an external stimulus allows us to become the leader that was lurking inside but had not emerged into the light of day. So, regardless of your level within your organisation, consider how you 'fit' there as a leader and what you can do right now in order to step up to be the best leader you can be, 'warts and all'.

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## About the Author



### Dr Suzanne Pollack

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As well as running her own learning and development company, Suzanne is the Programme Director for the Henley Leadership Programme. She is now a visiting faculty member, having previously been a full time member of the Henley Leadership and OD faculty. Suzanne has a PhD in how individuals' experience change and is an ABNLP certified trainer of Neuro Linguistic Programming (an enabler of swift and physically embedded behavioural change). She is also a University of Reading certified: coach, coaching supervisor, facilitator and trainer of trainers. Suzanne is qualified to administer the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Steps I and II), the Firo-B and the Strengths Deployment Inventory, as well as a range of 360 feedback and emotional intelligence tools.

Suzanne continues to develop her expertise in individual and leadership development, positive leadership, coaching, coaching supervision, therapy, facilitation, team development and organisational development. Suzanne has worked with small niche organisations through to the world's largest corporations, such as, Shell, Diagio, IBM and Barclays Bank. She has delivered interventions in Africa, Asia, Europe, New Zealand, South America and the USA. Suzanne has been told that her ability to "hear" what is not said, her natural empathy combined with a directness that is filtered through an ability to laugh often (most especially at herself!) has been a key part of the success of the many projects she has worked on during her career.

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