

How Can You Learn Leadership?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

How did you learn to be a leader? Most of us have people we learned from, teachers and mentors. These key people in our lives offer help to us both as we begin to lead, and along the way. I've been thinking about two important aspects of leadership: skill and self. How do these get communicated to people who are learning to lead?

The first aspect, skill, is the technique of leadership. It may be more rightly called the technique of management. In fact, we could talk about a number of skills involved in leading. If you supervise people, you need to learn to carry out a performance review. Most leaders need to know how to get up in front of a group and speak effectively. You need to know how to run a meeting. You can work on any of these skills for a lifetime. I'm part of a Toastmasters club, where I keep working on developing my speaking skills, even though I've been speaking for over 25 years.

Still, skill in the nuts and bolts of leadership is not enough. "Ten Ways to Be an Effective Leader" will not make you an effective leader. There's another important aspect, one that is harder to teach and harder to learn. This is about self: leading out of who you are. Having a self is not selfish, because the gift you give to others comes out of the deepest part of who you are.

Other leaders can show the way by being themselves. Yet no one can teach you how to be yourself. You can learn, over time, but no one else really knows you. Having a self means you can resist pressure to conform while still being flexible. You can take a stand without shooting yourself in the foot, because you respect others while you do so. You can manage your own emotional life, since you are mature enough to recognize your feelings without being controlled by them. Perhaps it is better to say "self" in leaders can be cultivated but not taught. My best mentors have asked me great questions to help me discern who I am as a leader. They have helped me think through my own most important beliefs and principles. They have often shared their own wisdom and experience. Still, they haven't assumed their approach would work for me. They have seen more in me than I saw in myself.

Skill means knowing how to do certain things. Self means knowing how to be yourself when you do them. One of my ministerial colleagues also coached high school football. And he led his congregation like a coach: tough and challenging. They responded, and the church was thriving. Another leader I know is quiet and mild-mannered. He effectively leads an organization with a multi-million-dollar budget. Both of these leaders lead out of themselves. They have led their organizations for years.

I've found it takes less energy to lead out of myself, out of the core of who I am, rather than trying to become something I'm not. Plenty of models for leadership exist, and volumes have been written suggesting, "lead like me." We can learn important leadership skills from others. Still, we learn how to be ourselves not by imitating others but by discovering, over time, our unique identity.

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