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Leadership: Whence It Came, Where It Went

KING SOLOMON WISELY remarked that there is nothing new under the sun. Leadership is relational and as such, has been a part of the human equation ever since two people first came together and found themselves responsible for and charged with making something of their world. And we have been doing it ever since. From the beginning, as it is today, it is and has been practiced both badly and remarkably well.

The earliest practitioners knew in principle what we know today. We aren't the first to have learned how to lead, but in no other time have we tried to quantify it like we do today. Our scientific approach and thinking, while of great value, has really only added to our understanding of the why. Though we are drawn to binary reasoning and absolutes, leadership does not lend itself to that kind of thinking nor is it practiced that way. It is not rigid in nature.

In the study of leadership as in much else, complexity is used to hide the truth rather than reveal it. The general principles of human behavior are not complex and are available to everyone. For some it seems only right that something so important should be shrouded in mystery. We would be well advised not to make the simple complex. Leadership creates ample opportunity for nuances of thought to be displayed in other ways. At the same time, while leadership is not complex, it isn't easy. Make no mistake. Leadership is hard.

It is fashionable to raise leadership above the common man, yet it is in the common man that leadership resides and from the common man that leadership must rise to meet the challenges of the time. Leadership is common to us all—men and women—if we will but choose it.

Where are all the leaders? This is a persistent question. Actually, leaders are all around us. More often the problem we are lamenting is the lack of character we need in our leaders; the need for selflessness. Leaders reflect the society from which they come. If we don't like what we see, we have to grapple with the fact that we

are rewarding, nourishing and displaying the wrong behaviors in our homes, our schools and our churches. We need to take a hard look at these crucibles where our leaders are made. It is silly to endlessly attack what we have produced and do nothing about the source of the problem. We need to get the fundamentals right. Poor leadership is a self-inflicted wound.

At the same time, we as followers are a fickle lot. We don't always feel we need leaders. When times are difficult and the choices not so clear, we clamor for someone to lead us. When times are easy, we are ambivalent towards leadership. We would prefer to have no one telling us what we should do, guiding us to make distinctions or inspiring us to be more than we are. We like things just the way they are. Nothing more consistently troubles the human mind than to be presented with a new direction when things are going well. This human tendency no doubt led Peter Drucker to observe that leadership is a foul-weather job. We want a leader to save us; to take away the discomfort. But a great leader never does. A great leader never does for people what they can and should do for themselves. A great leader guides, demonstrates direction and provides encouragement.

If history teaches us anything, we learn that leadership is temporary and so it must be constantly renewed both individually and collectively. From history we also see how the context of leadership changes and so then its form must also adapt.

Experiencing leadership is a lot easier than doing leadership. It's more comfortable to push it off on someone else, than to expose ourselves by taking up the task. But it is a task we all must embrace at some level if we are to create a future for ourselves and others. Find your future in your present and let your passion and the needs of those around you, be your guide.

