
OPINION

Would You Follow Someone Like You?

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“Leadership is taken, not given,” a Novartis director revealed recently. It is one thing to bestow the title of director, CEO or president, he said, but quite another to be a leader who people will follow. “Would you want to be led by someone like you?” he asked.

One of the myths regarding leadership is that successful companies must have a dynamic and charismatic leader, according to Collins and Porras in their best-selling book *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (Harper, 2002).

The book gives examples of great companies, which are led by people who are not household names. These are executives who orchestrate and facilitate, and not necessarily rule with an iron fist. Collins and Porras explain that great leaders are more concerned with building core values, setting huge goals and developing a strong company culture. The truly great leaders are “‘clock builders’ not time keepers”.

The director from Novartis said education on its own did not make a leader. When I asked if he had a PhD he smiled and said the PhDs in his company reported to him. He had achieved what I have seen in many of our top candidates who have the ability to lead people. They always seem to have a great understanding of human relationships.

This is not to say that education is a hindrance to leadership - Jack Welch has a PhD in Chemical Engineering - however it is simply not a prerequisite.

Albert Einstein once said: “We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles but no personality. It cannot lead; it can only serve.”

Leadership is a hot topic that is well researched and widely written about. There are more than 13,000 books dedicated to the subject on Amazon.com.

The director from Novartis may have said it best: If you think you are the leader ask yourself: ‘Who is following you?’ ‘Would you really want to be led by you?’

When questioned, he explained that an effective leader understands people, understands their hopes, dreams, fears and inspirations.

And to really understand others we need to understand ourselves.

According to Coleman (Harvard Business Review, December, 1998) the most common characteristic of an effective leader is they all have a high degree of emotional intelligence.

Often the answer lies within. By understanding ourselves and being aware of what makes us tick, we will gain a better understanding of others.

Then we are ready to truly lead.
