

The Core Elements of Leadership: Commitment, Courage, and Conversation¹

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How often have you heard someone in an organization utter the lament “What we need here is leadership”? It is as if they were hoping for someone to come and rescue them from their current conditions and circumstances; someone that is, other than themselves. And, if you ask why they don’t take the initiative that is needed, you are likely to hear that they can’t lead without authority, power, or position. But they are mistaken.

Leadership does not depend on power and authority, but on whether you are willing to speak out for what you say is possible and to live with the consequences of that speaking. You can put very capable people with authority and power into leadership positions and situations, but that does not mean they will lead. Why not? Because leading is not a function of these or any number of other “external” elements. Leading is a function of commitment, courage, and conversation.

Commitment

The foundation for leading is a passionate commitment to a future that wasn't going to happen given the natural drift of events. Standing in front of a mob that is already heading somewhere is not really “leading” anyone. Leading is about taking people somewhere they didn’t realize they could go.

A passionate commitment is not simply a strong “want” for some result or object, but rather it is a strong, even a demanding stand that a “could be” future be brought into existence. This future may be grand and spectacular, such as putting a man on the moon, or more ordinary like creating an international conference, a multidisciplinary center, or a new training program.

As foundations for leadership, passionate commitments are to futures that are bigger than any individual can accomplish alone. Leading creates opportunities for others to contribute and the bigger the future to which one is committed, the bigger the opportunity for others to participate in its accomplishment. This means that ANY commitment can be the basis for leadership, as long as it calls for the contribution of others and we are sufficiently passionate about its accomplishment.

¹ Published in *Leadership Links*, OSU Extension Service, College of Agriculture, The Ohio State University, Summer, 1998, 1-2.

While a range of sources are referenced throughout this article, we would like to make special mention of [Landmark Worldwide](#) and [Werner Erhard](#) whose work, programs, and ideas have informed, guided, and shaped our thinking and without which this paper would not have been possible.

Leading occurs where there is a sufficient passion, intention, or willingness to accomplish the futures to which we are committed. Where we generate passion, we generate action, and action is at the heart of leading. And since all of us have commitments to possible futures, the question is whether we are passionate enough about their accomplishment to act.

Courage

It is one thing to have a passionate commitment, and another thing altogether to act on that commitment. It is relatively easy to talk about leadership, but it is something different to actually engage in leading. Along with every opportunity for leading comes our very personal relationship to risk and failure. Each of us has to balance risks we are willing to take against our passion for a new future. Some people are willing to go skydiving. They have a particular relationship with risk that is different from those of us who are more wedded to the ground. Some people are afraid to propose a new idea to their boss or to speak up in meetings, even when they know doing so could make a difference. They have a passion that is insufficient to get them to step out and lead in that area.

Leading calls for courage. But courage is not something that someone has, like an asset, it is something that one generates in the moment that action is required. What we call courage is evident whenever one acts with responsibility in the face of risk and failure. Acting with responsibility means stepping up and “taking charge”, being a force in intentionally causing something to happen rather than standing back and hoping. When we act with responsibility, we act knowing there are risks and that we are willing to accept the consequences in order to accomplish what we say is possible.

Conversation

Leading occurs in the conversations that gives other people access to the possibility of accomplishing something they weren't going to accomplish otherwise. Leading occurs in the conversations that give people the fuel and the opportunity to go somewhere they didn't know they could, to commit themselves to a future possibility, and to take action consistent with the accomplishment of that future. To provide any of this, leaders must speak for what they see is possible and invite the contribution of others. The role of conversations in leading is vital: there is no leadership without them.

Conversations includes all the talks we have with people about what we see as possible, what we really, truly care about, and what opportunities there are for us to work or play together to bring about a new future. It is in these conversations that we get "followers", or people who want to play in the new game. People do not follow someone unless they have enrolled themselves in a

possibility they see out of what was spoken by another. People are empowered to participate because they are enrolled in what is being created.

Leading, therefore, happens when someone is speaking a future in which other people can participate. Their participation may be simply that they recognize the possibility you are passionate about, or they may contribute ideas or time or resources to your area of passion. People become engaged in the conversation with you, and collaborate in making the new future happen. Some people accept the invitation to work with you, while others refuse. But in the absence of your speaking, there is no invitation to a future and no opportunity to accept or refuse the invitation.

An Invitation

Anyone who is willing to accept the challenge of bringing into existence a future to which they are passionately committed is ready for leadership. There is nothing more required than the courage to speak for what is possible and to keep speaking for it. Through conversations, we create opportunities for others, even though we may not know what opportunities they see. And it is these opportunities that enroll others in being followers.

Since each of us has the power to talk, we each have all the attributes that are needed for leading. The only question is whether we are willing to step forward and speak our commitments. Though there may be those who will argue that leaders have special attributes, or special circumstances, I invite you to consider that such arguments actually disempower leadership rather than empower its development. You have the opportunity to lead every time you speak. I invite you to take it.