David W. Leslie, chancellor professor of education at the College of William and Mary, notes that “colleges and universities have presented leadership conundrums…from the most varied perspectives…Yet this vast trove of purported wisdom remains somehow unsatisfying and desperately random” (Wergin, 2007, p. xv). That is to say, despite all that has been written about leadership, the question still remains: What does it take to be an effective leader?

At the risk of being redundant, I wish to share 10 recommendations that I am convinced enhance an individual’s ability to be an effective leader. These principles are based on the concept of “leading in place” as recently popularized by Wergin and Shapiro. Shapiro (2005) states, “Leadership is an action, not a title, and the ability to lead can be found in every person. Each of us must claim our authority to lead at the right time and in the right place” (p. 1).

Here are 10 characteristics that I have found to positively contribute to effective emergent leadership. My suggestions are presented in a David Letterman–ish style, beginning with the least and advancing to the most important.

• **Number 10: Follow procedures and adhere to policies.** Effective leaders are essentially good followers. They understand that they are accountable to those in authority. They know it is not a good idea to behave as a lone wolf, but that they must instead keep their work priorities aligned with the organization’s goal and have an appropriate sense of self-importance. People who lead in place value the necessity of following procedures and adhering to established policies.

• **Number 9: Submit to the authority of others.** Closely related to number 10 is the recognition that we are all under the authority of someone, whether it is a supervisor, director, president, board of governors, or whomever else.

• **Number 8: Take risks.** Sometimes it is necessary for leaders to step outside the box, to be innovative. Leaders must be flexible enough to know when it is time to try a new procedure or implement a new policy. For many taking a risk is frightening, but such behavior can be invaluable, benefiting the entire group.

• **Number 7: Commitment.** Any person who assumes a leadership role needs to be committed to the group. The group’s vision and mission must be internalized by the leader. An effective leader
is a person who can commit to using his or her ability to lead others, perform technical skills, and conceptualize situations, thus helping to ensure goal achievement.

- **Number 6: Be proactive.** Covey (1989) points out the need to be proactive. Individuals who assume leadership must take the proverbial bull by the horns and move forward to be successful.

- **Number 5: Expect conflict.** Conflict among people is a natural, inevitable, and constant factor of human interaction. An effective leader expects conflict and is able to manage it in a productive manner.

- **Number 4: Tell the truth, but with compassion.** To some degree conflicts occur because people are not able to differentiate between task-related conflict issues and their personal investment in a given situation. Bracey, Rosenblum, Sanford, and Trueblood (1990) point out the importance of truthfulness in leadership. Yet at the same time the leader must compassionately tell the truth (e.g., about a faculty member’s job performance, etc.).

- **Number 3: Listen.** Communication plays a vital role in the achievement of interpersonal and organizational goals. Communication is a two-way process. Effective communication requires leaders capable of effective listening. Covey’s (1989) Habit #5, Seek First to Understand, Then Seek to Be Understood, reflects the epitome of effective listening. Ineffective listening undermines people’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and creativity. Remember, hearing and listening are not synonymous terms.

- **Number 2: Love people.** Roger D’Aprix stated that leaders must be “loving in [their] organizational relationships” (cited in Goldhaber, 1993, p. 217). “Loving” in this context means that we acknowledge the value of our coworkers and respect them with the dignity they deserve. We let them know that we care for them whether we like them or not. The bottom line is that individuals must value people and relationships with them if they are to claim their “authority” to lead.

- **Number 1: Check your attitude.** I contend that effective leadership begins with a correct mind-set. That mind-set is founded upon an individual’s willingness to lead, to serve others. An effective leader desires the opportunity to step up to be involved in controlling not only his or her personal actions, but the actions of those being led. This leadership attitude flows from a reasoned choice; it is a conscious decision to take on the role with all its rights and responsibilities. Amid the natural chaos and interpersonal interactions, effective leaders are able to demonstrate a fixed purpose. Such leadership is determined to ensure not only that personal goals are reached, but
more important, that the group achieves its objectives and fulfills its mission. Those who seek to lead in place must be compelled to lead no matter the personal cost.

In closing, allow me to point out that these characteristics are not some magic formula for success, nor do they serve as a 10-step program like the A.A. 12-step recovery program; but when you adopt these characteristics and their underlying principles, I am certain that you will be a more effective leader.

I agree with David W. Leslie, chancellor professor of education, that there has been a lot of thinking, theorizing, and writing about leadership. Yet I am convinced that we should continue to explore what constitutes effective leadership. In doing so it may be that we can bring greater clarity to what it takes to lead effectively.

Based on what I have shared, I do not pretend that I have answered the question of what it takes to be an effective leader. Hopefully, however, by sharing my thoughts about leading in place, I have added to the wisdom of literature concerning effective leadership.

These characteristics are based on my leading in place for more than 30 years in the academic community. Let me encourage you to take action, to claim your authority to lead when the time comes, in the right place.

REFERENCES


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