Leadership is Character

Alexandre Havard

Leadership is only superficially about what we imagine. Hearing the word, we think of heads of state or government moving nations to action, captains of industry bringing products to market that change our lives, generals leading armies into battle. We suppose it to be an amalgam of ambition, charisma, cunning, know-how, access to money, and a gift for being in the right place at the right time.

These are talents and qualities and resources leaders can use to advantage, but none of them constitutes the essence of leadership.

Leadership is about character.

No, leadership is character.

There are those who think one must be born to lead—that some have a knack for it and some do not, that leadership is largely a matter of temperament combined with experience. Not everyone can be a Roosevelt or a de Gaulle or a Churchill, they think.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Leadership is not reserved to an elite. It is the vocation not of the few but the many.

Heads of state and schoolteachers, captains of industry and housewives, military chiefs of staff and health care workers—all exercise leadership. People expect them to do the right thing, to be men and women of character and virtue, to be motivated by a magnanimous vision for all those in their charge. And great is the disappointment when they fail.

The business scandals of our time invariably give rise to calls for increased government oversight, reform of corporate governance, and revision of codes of ethical conduct.

These things may have their place, but they miss the essential point. The perpetrators of corporate wrongdoing invariably know that what they are doing is wrong. And yet they do it anyway. This is a failure of character.

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Dr. Martin Luther King dreamed of an America in which a man would be judged “not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character.”

What is the “content of character?” It is virtue, or, more precisely, the set of classical human virtues—above all, magnanimity, humility, prudence, courage, self-control, and justice—that are the subject of this book. It is my contention that leaders either strive to grow in virtue as surely as they breathe or they are not leaders. Life for them is a quest for personal excellence.

Virtuous Leadership is for people who desire to have a grand purpose in their life. What purpose is grander than the quest for personal excellence?

Before entering into a detailed consideration of each of the human virtues of greatest relevance to leadership, let us get our bearings by reflecting on some general observations about character, virtue, and temperament.

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“It is character through which leadership is exercised,” avers Peter Drucker, the preeminent management theoretician of modern times.

His professional confere, Warren Bennis, concurs: “Leadership is a metaphor for centeredness, congruity and balance in one’s life.” Centeredness, congruity, and balance do not occur naturally. We acquire them through our own efforts. The very effort to acquire them is an act of leadership.

Leadership, therefore, cannot be temperament, because temperament is given by nature. One’s temperament is phlegmatic or hot-blooded, for example, not because one chose it, but because that’s the hand nature dealt.

Leadership can only be character.

Character is not forced on us by nature, however. We are not stuck with it. It is something we can shape and mold and strengthen, and as we do so, we achieve Bennis’ centeredness, congruity, and balance.

We strengthen our character through the habitual practice of sound moral habits, called ethical or human virtues. In so doing, character leaves an indelible imprint on our temperament, which then ceases to dominate our personality.

Virtues are qualities of the mind, the will, and the heart that instill strength of character and stability of personality. They are acquired through repetition.

The four main human virtues as defined by Plato are prudence, justice, courage, and self-control. These are the so-called cardinal virtues, from the Latin word *cardo*, or “hinge.” These are the virtues upon which all other human virtues hinge. Each of the non-cardinal virtues is bound up in and depends on one of the cardinal virtues.

In the Book of Wisdom, we read: “Wisdom teaches self-control and prudence, justice and courage, and nothing in life is more useful than these (Wis 8:7).” That the Old

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Testament mentions the four cardinal virtues shows that the Jews valued the wisdom of the ancient Greeks.

We must mention two other virtues—magnanimity and humility. Both are fundamental, though are not considered cardinal by tradition. For the ancient Greeks, humility depended on the cardinal virtue of self-control and magnanimity on the cardinal virtue of courage.

Virtues are dynamic forces—witness the word’s Latin root, *virtus*, meaning “strength” or “power.” Each, when practiced habitually, progressively enhances one’s capacity to act.

Here is what each of the six virtues under consideration enhances the ability to do:

- **Prudence**: to make right decisions.
- **Courage**: to stay the course and resist pressures of all kinds.
- **Self-control**: to subordinate passions to the spirit and fulfillment of the mission at hand.
- **Justice**: to give every individual his due.
- **Magnanimity**: to strive for great things, to challenge myself and others.
- **Humility**: to overcome selfishness and serve others habitually.

Virtues do not take the place of professional competence, but are part and parcel of it and substantially so. I might have a degree in psychology and work as a consultant, but if I lack prudence, I will have a hard time giving my clients sound advice. Perhaps I have an MBA and am a senior executive for a major corporation. Very good, but if I lack courage, my ability to lead in the face of opposition is already compromised. I may have a degree in theology and serve as a minister, but if I am devoid of magnanimity, I will stagnate as a person and as a believer, and will lead my flock into the same condition.

Professional competence entails more than the mere possession of technical or academic knowledge. It includes the capacity to use this knowledge well for some fruitful purpose.

Leaders are defined by their magnanimity and humility. They always have a dream, which they invariably transform into a vision and a mission. It is magnanimity—the striving of the spirit towards great ends—that confers this lofty state of mind.

But leadership consists of more than just “thinking big.” A leader is always a servant—of those in his professional, familial, and social circle, his countrymen, and indeed the whole of humanity. And the essence of service is humility. Leaders who practice humility respect the innate dignity of other people, and especially of fellow participants in a joint mission.

Magnanimity and humility go hand in hand in leadership. Magnanimity generates noble ambitions; humility channels these ambitions into serving others.

Charisma in leadership stems from visionary greatness (magnanimity) and devotion to service (humility). Magnanimity and humility are virtues of the heart *par excellenc*e, giving leaders who possess them a charismatic touch. We must not confuse charisma with a gift for galvanizing the mob. “Leaders” who possess this dubious talent may generate short-term enthusiasm, but rarely confidence, and ultimately only derision...
and contempt. Mussolini is a case in point. Leadership is not demagoguery. It is about excellence sustained over the long term, even if the leader lacks a magnetic personality.

Magnanimity is under severe strain these days. Modern society’s weird mélange of individualism and collectivism has spawned generations of small, self-centered people on the make. Humility has also seen better days. Modern culture holds this marvelous virtue—understood as service—in something approaching contempt. Until not too long ago, service was one of the loftiest words in our vocabulary; now it is an almost exclusively commercial concept. When we speak of service, we mean business services, remunerated services, the services (i.e., non-manufacturing) sector, and the like. We think of service as something you buy.

If magnanimity and humility—the pillars of leadership—are virtues principally of the heart, the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and self-control—leadership’s bedrock virtues—are principally of the mind and the will. Prudence, the virtue specific to decision-makers, is the most important, since to lead effectively I need the capacity to make right decisions.

_Virtue creates the space in which leadership occurs by instilling trust._ Humility and prudence are vital here. This is because trust begins when others know I will serve them, which is humility, and ends when they discover I am unable to make right decisions, which means I lack the virtue of prudence.

If I replace humility with techniques of communication, I will fail as a leader. As Stephen Covey points out, “If I try to use human influence strategies and tactics of how to get other people to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, to like me and each other—while my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity and insincerity—then, in the long run, I cannot be successful.”

Leaders never resort to manipulation. Nor do they lead by exercising the _potestas_, or power, inherent in their office. Instead, they lead through _auctoritas_, the authority that stems from character. Those who lack genuine authority and succumb to the temptation to exercise unalloyed power are leaders in name only. In fact, they are non-leaders. This is a vicious circle: low authority leads to abuse of power, which leads to further erosion of authority… and the path to authentic leadership is blocked.

Because virtue is a habit acquired through practice, I say leaders are not born, but trained. Not everyone can become president or prime minister or win the Nobel Prize for Literature or play center field for the New York Yankees. But everyone can grow in virtue.

Leadership excludes no one.

_Leaders reject a utilitarian approach to virtue._ It is not something they cultivate just to become better at what they do, although it is good to want that. They cultivate virtue first and foremost to become better people. _Aretē_, the Greek word for virtue, implies excellence of being, rather than excellence in doing.

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