

Leaders and leadership



*“But select capable men
from all the people—men
who fear God,
trustworthy men who
hate dishonest gain...”
Exodus 18:21*

A leader for all seasons

One very conspicuous feature of the troubled time in which we live, is the variety of leadership styles in action. Without wishing to parody or overstate things, it seems to me that on the world stage and on our screens, we can see:

- The ‘bully’, responding with superficial knee jerk responses – promising simplistic quick fixes,
- The ‘charismatic orator’, inspiring people to believe in and aim for a better future but perhaps without a grip on the finer detail,
- The ‘reflective’, analytical and measured, perhaps a little dry to command popular approval,
- The ‘intellectual’, thoughtful and acknowledging of the complexities of situations, but not so in touch with the average man or woman in the street
- The ‘reasonable’, so at pains to be fair-minded but unable to get off the fence and express a clear-cut opinion.

It is, of course, very easy to be critical of leaders but the reality is that life and therefore leadership is complicated. We who live in democratic societies have the responsibility of choosing those who lead us; so it’s probably worthwhile pausing to ponder what makes a good leader. What sort of individuals should we be looking for? Christians, who look to the Bible for insight and guidance, have a great deal of material that bears on this theme in the form of models to imitate and cautionary tales giving things to avoid. Biblical words such as king, shepherd, overseer, deacon (servant), shed insight on aspects of leadership roles.

Different types of situation require different types of leader. A wartime leader would not necessarily make a good peacetime leader. A reformer would probably not make a great orchestra conductor. So, it is important to get the right fit. Having done a magnificent job of leading our nation through World War II, Churchill was not judged by the nation to be the right man to lead in the aftermath.

Any sphere of leadership will require relevant skills, abilities, experience and knowledge. But in addition to these, are there any fundamental or common characteristics are important? I think there are, although they don’t feature in paper qualifications. With this in mind, I offer four as food for thought. I’d suggest they are relevant to any type of leadership role.

Character

In the New Testament, when the apostle Paul was giving advice on the subject of choosing local church leaders, he urged that first consideration be given to *character*. Perhaps, that could be a good place for us to begin. A scrutiny of a person’s background and achievements and the values that are communicated by their speaking and their actions might, at the very least, help to rule out those less worthy of our trust.

A willingness to listen

In Old Testament times, Solomon’s son Jeroboam, on coming to power, was unwilling to hear the voice of the people. He chose instead to heed the voice of the young hotheads and with disastrous consequences. Part of a willingness to listen, is a willingness to change one’s mind. It might even lead to saying, “I made a mistake.” or “I was wrong” or “things have changed, and we need a new approach.”. Many years ago, a

friend of mine, who was a young pastor, was taken to task for admitting during his weekly preaching, that he had been wrong about something and had changed his mind. His critic warned him that he would lose the people's trust if he continued to acknowledge such things. I don't agree. It actually gave me more not less confidence in him. Here was someone who was willing to learn and be flexible when he was given more information. Unfortunately, the adversarial tone of some political discussions, where leaders are being held to account, does make it hard for political leaders to admit when they have had a change of mind or a change of heart without providing ammunition for their opposition!

A passion for justice and righteousness

These figure prominently in the words of the prophet Isaiah as being the characteristics of the society God wishes to establish on earth. The kind of justice and righteousness envisaged here, was that which had a strong social dimension and considered the interests of the poor and vulnerable. The prophet was not talking about justice in the sense of being "*legally correct*" – such as exploiting loopholes would allow. He was talking about a society that was equitable and fair for all and not just for the privileged.

Serving

Jesus said about himself that he had come *not to be served* but to *serve* (*Matthew 20:28*). Many of us are familiar with Graham Kendrick's song – the Servant-King a powerful combination of two words which capture the essence of the Christian approach to power and responsibility. We will do best when led by leaders who seek to serve us.

So Godly character, a willingness to listen, a passion for justice and righteousness and a desire to serve others. These are a starting point for all leaders. But what is our part as followers? Certainly not to sit back and find fault. Having chosen them and given them our trust, we will do well to pray for them. This is what the apostle Paul urged us to do because as anyone who's been in a position of leadership will tell us, *it ain't easy!*

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