

The world is hungry for great leadership. In times of great need, how do we differentiate the great from the greedy, the strong leader from the despot? The principles are ancient and continue to stand the test of time...

Elements of Timeless Leadership

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Great leadership is timeless, always in vogue. The world has been hungry for great leaders from time immemorial. In times of chaos and war, environmental and social upheaval, great leaders often emerge pointing the way toward peace. In times of tranquility, calm and prosperity, great leaders have emerged to maintain the systems of order and to challenge apathy.

Great leadership is always popular, but in times of enormous need, how do we differentiate the great from the greedy, the strong leader from the despot? The principles are ancient and have stood the test of time. Great leaders always move out in front, establishing direction, insuring order, and providing correction and regulation as needed. Always passionate about their followers, great leaders are eager to live their lives in service to their needs.

When considering highly regarded leaders throughout both world and personal history, we seem to perennially return to the analogy of the shepherd. We deem it the supreme accolade to characterize a leader as shepherd. There is much to learn about great leadership from this analogy. Through an examination of the traits and attributes, perspectives on the shepherd's approach will move us to next level leadership.

1. The shepherd recognizes the sheep are not his to do with as he pleases.

He understands the sheep are not a tool, a means to an end, but a resource charged to his care. He is empowered, entrusted by another; responsible, and answerable to one who has greater authority. As an effective leader, he understands not only what it means to be a leader, but what it means to follow as well. Understanding and acceptance of the cycle cultivates and reinforces character.

2. The sheep hear, recognize and follow the voice of their shepherd.

People naturally navigate to the familiar. Trust develops with experience gained in relationships. We have often heard that familiarity breeds contempt, but it also breeds trust and, with time and consistency, strengthens expectations.

3. The shepherd knows the sheep intimately and is able to call each by name.

Shepherds use a system of sounds, clicks and hisses to call the sheep, slightly different for each of the sheep in the flock and every sheep knows and responds to the specific sound which is his. Consistent caring proximity is always recognized and always produces results. Relationship is the key – there is no such thing as an absentee shepherd.

4. The shepherd always leads the sheep into the safest, most beneficial conditions available and always away from harm.

Strategically, he goes out before them, out of harm, into safety – but always maintaining the lead. He never expects the sheep to move into circumstances he is not willing to withstand among them, rather always expecting more of himself than he would of those in his charge.

5. The shepherd is willing to put the immediate needs and well-being of the sheep before his own, often at great personal risk.

The well-being of those entrusted to him is paramount to the shepherd. This singularity of purpose encourages his decisions to be always grounded in integrity. The shepherd is prepared to lay down his life both literally and figuratively.

6. There is a difference between a hired hand and a shepherd.

A hired hand is motivated by compensation. A shepherd has a deep and committed interest in the sheep. He is one who is responsible for what is not his - - by his own choice. And his relationship is characterized by longevity and consistent presence, with or without significant compensation. The shepherd is at all times ready to lay down his life for the sheep. How much more the leader for the people entrusted to him. People are a sacred trust and serving them is an awesome commission.

Finally, the true shepherd understands the critical difference between power, often stolen and generally imposed oppressively upon the unsuspecting, and authority, which speaks of responsibility and answerability to a higher power.

The picture is a simple one, possibly too unsophisticated for the most elite business schools. But as we turn to the simple scenario, we find that common sense, in its crystal clarity, is at its base, and as Victor Hugo observed, "common sense is in spite of, not as a result of education." Hopefully that is changing, so we will turn out a generation of leaders who are both educated and wise, simple and passionately dedicated.

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