Emerging Sage Leaders: Reflecting On the Characteristics of Other Successful Leaders

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What I mean by humility is that some leaders recognize the strengths of diverse styles and cultures and ways of being in the world and are able to build alliances among those differences. Emerging Sage Leader

In this essay emerging sage leaders reflect on the qualities they most admire in other leaders. They also identify what they least admire in other leaders and what the implications are for leadership when the admired qualities are missing.

The attributes that emerging sage leaders most and least admire in leaders reflect their own hopes for becoming effective community leaders. There are also most and least admired qualities that emerging Sages say they identify in great leaders who they view from afar, but probably will never emulate themselves.

Most Admired

Integrity, vision, effective communications, humility, and empowering others head the list. As with most of their own leadership attributes, the qualities that emerging sages most admire in other leaders reflect both Servant Leadership and Jim Collins' Level 3, 4, and 5 Leadership styles that are discussed in Chapter One.

Integrity. This is often described as "the quality or state of being whole, complete, and unbroken." In leadership terms, integrity has to do with such traits as honesty, fairness, consistency, willingness to admit mistakes, sense of humor, and leading by example:

The leaders I've most admired inspire me to do better. They possess honesty and integrity, and these are the basis for trust. And they have a great sense of humor, which I love. I think I inspire people to do better. I've seen the effects of that, and this is my strongest suit.

I most admire leaders who walk their talk and lead by example. You have to live true to what you are telling people. I try to stay balanced and healthy in my own life, so when I talk about it with people I come from a place of authenticity rather than preaching.

Visionary. A visionary is a person who projects a clear inspirational description of a desired future state. In organizational terms, vision is a running narrative of an organization's mission and strategic purposes unfolding over time—a statement about future impact that creates passion in the present. Emerging sages place high value on a leader's vision:

The quality I most admire in effective leaders is their belief that we can do anything. These are people who recognize community assets and know how to tap them. An effective leader has vision and deep, deep respect and humility.

I constantly ask, "What is the purpose of this organization? What is the purpose of this meeting? Why are we getting together? Is each item on the agenda and every decision relevant?" Someone needs to raise these questions to keep the group on track without being iron-fisted. It evokes questions about essence, about core values, about what is important, and how life feeds into that. To me, a leader is someone who has a vision and creatively figures out how to achieve it.

Effective communications. To be a visionary, a leader must be able to communicate the future state envisioned:

The qualities I most admire in effective leaders is the ability to communicate and the ability to feel like I've been heard. If you can't talk to your leaders, you're wasting your

time. Leaders need to be accessible and have the ability to listen and hear. And they must honestly give input back. I think I'm very accessible.

One of the things I most admire in a leader is fairness and a willingness to listen to people who they don't necessarily agree with. Also, the ability to appreciate different points of view and be able to articulate their views clearly and respectfully.

Humility. Traditionally, humility often has been seen as human weakness and anything but a trait of effective leadership. Pareena Lawrence sees humility differently. Humility includes such characteristics as self-awareness, valuing others, being willing to learn and change, sharing power, ability to hear truth and admit mistakes, and valuing a culture of openness where dissent is encouraged.

And emerging sage leaders agree:

I admire a leader's willingness to let go of his or her ego. Leadership is not about making yourself look good or pursing your own agenda. A good leader is willing to step aside and let someone else take credit for accomplishments. It is amazing and wonderful when a leader can bring someone else along and let them have the glory. It is a beautiful thing!

I admire the leader who is humble and therefore teachable, and someone who is a good listener. Something they are really centered on so I can trust that their decisions are coming out of a principle-centered place and not just a whim. I like the term "Gentle Warrior" to describe a leader. Someone who is not afraid to fight for what they believe in, yet who is a humble and gentle person as well.

Empowering others. A significant trait of humble leaders is their overriding need and drive to empower other people:

Empowering people is an important quality of a leader. That's something I have to improve on because I'm very capable and tend to think, "I'll just do it myself." It's not

that I don't delegate, I'm happy to do that. But I have a pretty healthy ego, so I like to take things on. In fact, team consensus-building and empowerment are two things I need to work on because I tend to want to grab attention.

I think it's important to find strengths in the people that you work with and help bring them forward. I have two mentors in my life, and their strength is to grow and encourage new leaders.

Other traits most admired in other leaders. Additional leadership qualities that emerging sages most admire in other leaders include perseverance, teamwork, and consensus-building:

I admire staying power, the ability to visualize and persist. The thing I most admire about great leaders is that they are able to lead in an elegant and ambitious way over a sustained period of time. I wish I had more of that.

I appreciate leaders who value teamwork, are collaborative, and can draw people into strengthening their organization. And leaders who take responsibility and who give credit where credit is due. I try my best to be that person.

Other most admired qualities are leaders who welcome differences. They demonstrate compassion, generosity, and calmness under fire:

I know leaders who are welcoming and embrace differences, who inspire people to come together and to accomplish something. I admire them tremendously! I also admire their ability to summarize information and bring items to a close. Thoughtfully leading meetings and staying in control without making an issue.

I am in awe of people who have the capacity to influence others, not with bravado but with thoughtfulness and attention. I think that is born out of true generosity and compassion for others, and the understanding that one doesn't always know the answer.

One of the things that always inspires me is leaders being cool and reasonable when in crisis. In construction, it inspires me when people can stay cool when things get a little out of control. Most inspiring are those leaders who have the intrinsic ability to motivate and inspire others. It is the one thing that I don't naturally have that I admire most.

And having a good sense of humor and acknowledging the accomplishments of others are also valued by emerging sages:

I most admire people who are irreverent, who don't get too serious, people who can keep us all lighter. If people are happy and laughing, they are going to be more receptive. I remember something that Eve Ensler said: "When people are laughing, mouths are open, and you have a direct link to the brain."

Being able to support people and letting them know they're doing a good job are qualities I admire in a leader. And giving others confidence and making them feel good about themselves and their abilities. When I worked with kids, being with teenagers was always my favorite because I was so into building their self-esteem. I think I am good at that.

Least Admired/Disliked

There are numerous qualities that emerging sage leaders dislike in other leaders. Some of the least admired leadership traits are the exact opposite of qualities most admired, but not all. The leading candidates are hubris, ineffective communication, prematurely rushing to judgment on decisions, lacking vision and focus on organizational mission, and failing to trust others and delegate to them:

Hubris. The most ancient quality attributed to leaders is hubris, the tendency to exhibit excessive pride, ambition, and arrogance. Its national home is Washington, DC, but this leadership trait is found everywhere. Emerging sages dislike this quality more than any other leadership trait:

Probably the biggest mistake is leaders who don't care who is in their way as they pursue goals. So you have a zealot, a know-it-all, or someone moving things behind the scenes in a negative way without being up front about it.

Excessive ego is probably the biggest problem. I do that a lot, thinking that I am my activism and my work. Becoming so tied into it that there is not space for other parts of my life or space for other people, and I can't hear what others are saying. Becoming adamant about doing things "my way" is one of the most common things that happens with leaders.

A good example of hubris at work is micro-managing, whether it is a control or a time management issue. I've had the experience of working under these conditions, and it is oppressive. Another is when the leader thinks he or she is the only person who can fix things. As leaders we have a tendency to isolate ourselves and not ask for help. Perhaps the one is borne out of the other.

Ineffective communications. Sometimes this has to do with leaders not listening carefully, or being unwilling to listen to the beat of drummers other than themselves. At other times ineffective communications reflects the inability of the leader to be clear about goals and expectations:

I think one mistake is not taking a moment to listen and really pay attention to what is going on in the moment. That second when you ignore queues that are there is when you'll go down the path of making a decision that could have detrimental results.

Not communicating enough and not communicating the right things. Any leadership mistakes that I would like to see changed usually revolve around this central theme. My husband and I were having a discussion about this the other night, and he said the one thing he would have done differently in his work is to communicate more, better, and at the right times.

> *I think it goes back to not communicating. With a lack of communication there's room for feelings of deceit. Even if a leader is making good decisions based on good information, others can misinterpret that or feel there's another agenda if the communication isn't good. Even if it's scary to communicate a problem, it's usually best to do so.*

Prematurely rushing to judgment. A certain mark of hubris is the leader who assumes he has all of the answers and plunges ahead with a decision that turns out to be ill-timed or fundamentally wrong. Emerging sages describe this kind of leader in various ways:

> *I see a lot of school leaders reacting in the moment rather than taking time to reflect. There is a tendency to be on the steamroller of decision-making without contemplation or follow-through.*

> *One of the most common mistakes is judging people before actually having conversations with them. Just accepting someone else's perceptions and biases and holding it against a person, without taking the time to formulate their own opinion, is detrimental. We should take the time to look inside a person before reaching conclusions about them.*

> *The mistakes I see leaders making most would be moving too quickly without enough information, or moving too quickly without bringing involved people along. Another mistake I see is when leaders become too insular and lose the support of their staff. I am learning how important internal communication is!*

Lacking vision and focus on organizational mission. The old adage, "If you don't know where you are going, any plan will do" describes this kind of leader. Rudderless, the organization limps along from one port to another:

> *Losing focus on the mission is one mistake I see leaders making. We get so busy with what's on our plate and forget why we're here.*

A couple of the mistakes I see leaders make frequently are neglecting to take care of themselves, failing to set boundaries, and taking too much ownership over their own vision and process. Being too attached to a particular vision can work when you're alone, but not when you're part of a team.

Sometimes a leader's vision can become static and lifeless. For example, doing the same thing that has been done in the past. I have been involved in a lot of special events, both successful and faltering. Frequently, events falter because organizers are doing everything the same way without consideration being given to the economic environment or the event becoming stale and less appealing.

Failing to trust others and delegate to them. Another sure mark of hubris in action is when the leader assumes only he or she can take right action. It is but one step for self-confidence to turn into arrogance:

Not trusting is a leadership disease. Even more when we don't trust process and collective wisdom and try to make something happen when it just isn't ready. An effective leader will press against the edges and limitations and allow a group to see them, yet let the group come to its own conclusion of what is possible.

Not giving the people they are leading room to grow and to have a voice is a huge mistake. I see executive directors taking responsibility for all of the good things that happen in an organization and then blaming subordinates when things go wrong.

Being unwilling to work in collaboration with other people or organizations is misguided. This is especially true in a community like ours. There are so many nonprofits, and everyone wants to take credit for whatever their little piece of that is and, thus, are unwilling to share. Some folks don't want to share power, don't want to share their resources, and don't want to lose their control over a situation.

Other qualities disliked in leaders. Emerging sages include lack of integrity, duplicity, and dictating rather than inspiring others among additional disliked leadership attributes:

> *Making promises leaders can't keep and duplicity, saying one thing and doing another, are traits I despise. Like having a public image that is different from how they are in private. That is devastating for the people who want to believe in their leaders.*

> *It's all about integrity, having a principle-centered leader. People need to know where you are going with something, and they need to know that you're being honest. Nothing can shoot you in the foot faster than contradicting yourself and not being totally honest up-front. Once you lose your credibility you are done, and there is hardly any way to get it back.*

> *One of the most serious things a leader can do is to lose touch with those they lead and represent, forgetting their role is to inspire rather than dictate. It is being the omnipotent director rather than the steward and public servant.*

And there are still other qualities: indecisiveness, not giving credit where it is due, lacking boldness and action-orientation, treating symptoms rather than causes, being close-minded, and confusing managing with leading:

> *Some leaders simply don't, or can't, lead. They fail to provide the management, the guidance, the expertise that is required. There has to be a place where the buck stops, and you have to be a decision maker if you're a leader. You have to be someone who is not afraid to make a decision.*

> *One of the biggest mistakes a leader can make is not giving credit where it is due, or taking credit for what others have accomplished. I see this a lot.*

> *Leaders must not be shrinking violets. Boldness often involves risks, but not taking risks results in stagnation.*

A key mistake I see leaders making is to try to oversimplify and treat a related group of issues exactly the same, without evaluating the individual circumstances of each. Often this is the result of treating symptoms rather than causes.

I would say that arrogance, and maybe insecurity or fear, is what motivates a lot of leaders. Many leaders are tied to ideologies, which is why I see them moving to emotional positions, beliefs, and assumptions rather than being open to new information.

The biggest mistake I see is people confusing managing with leading. Managing is safe, leading involves risk. Leaders can be great managers, but managers will not always make great leaders.

Work Ethics

We know from research being done on the nature of social entrepreneurship that civic engagements are not easy. These usually come with very few dollars, considerable public misunderstanding or disbelief, and a paucity of human energy and sustained support. Civic engagement that is enacted through social entrepreneurship inevitably involves a lot of persistence and endurance. It is a long-distance marathon rather than a hundred yard dash. Emerging sages talk about admired leaders who accept that small steps must occur while keeping the broad, long-term vision in mind—what a given venture can do for the community.

One of the keys to emerging leader success is the willingness to work hard in order to achieve goals; they're not afraid to "roll up their sleeves" and do some of the work themselves. They are persistent, a trait that *Good to Great's* Jim Collins admires and that some would call stubborn. They work hard on behalf of a vision and don't easily give-up when confronted by fatigue or discouragement if tangible accomplishments don't come easily.

Sometimes this work ethic shows-up as a leader being "determined" to identify a problem and stick with it. This determination is often anchored in the passion that admired leaders have for the work they are doing. The admired leader also helps others to stay focused on a vision: a river

without dams, a school system that is truly devoted to the welfare of children. And the admired leader doesn't give-up on people or on an important dream. When confronted by, "It can't be done. We've tried and can't do it," the admired leader asks, "Why not? Why can't we do it?"

Humility

Effective leaders are able to draw attention to the contributions being made by persons with whom they work. They listen carefully to their colleagues, valuing and making full use of their ideas. And these admired leaders know when to step back and let other members of the team take initiative. They also appreciate alternative perspectives and the rich information others can bring to complex issues the team is addressing. This doesn't mean these leaders always adopt their colleagues' recommendations, but it does suggest they invite perspectives that respond to challenges the leader and team are mutually facing. In other words, emerging sages admire those leaders who are humble (a second trait that is identified by Jim Collins).

This is a delicate balance, for it requires encouraging participation by all team members while staying true to a purpose or goal. It is easy to grip the process and outcomes so tightly that there is no room for adjustments along the way. Through their civic experiences and involvement with teams, and their observations of what makes for effective leadership, emerging sage leaders have learned about this balance—about how to avoid crossing the line into too much control or no control at all.