

The Power of Humble Leaders

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For many people, the word “leader” produces the mental image of a strong, charismatic, and outgoing person. Individuals look to their leaders for support and guidance because these leaders are usually able to take charge of difficult situations. It is possible that this image of a leader can cause average citizens to believe that they are not qualified; they might feel inadequate compared to idolized leaders. Nevertheless, some good leaders do not fit the accepted standard of how a leader should look or act. People should also look to the humble, wise, compassionate, and possibly soft-spoken leaders around them. A successful leader does not get caught up in his or her pride but enjoys serving others.

An effective leader shows compassion for the people he or she leads. Leaders should encourage a sense of community in a given area. A component of this sense of community involves caring for people and getting to know others on a personal level. Reverend Shane Claiborne (2010) travels all over the country, talking to groups of people about his ideas regarding servanthood, leadership, and sustainability. He is a very humble individual who made it clear that he lives to serve others. Shane Claiborne is a leader in the movement toward sustainable living. He warned against overconsumption and greed. He has changed his patterns of living in order to avoid harming the environment and to better serve others (Claiborne, 2010). Rev. Claiborne mentioned that he lived on very little money. However, he is happy and getting by just fine with what he has. Like a good leader, he gives back to the community and shares his passion for change with others, inviting everyone to be a part of changing the world. He projects humility and love in everything he does.

Shane Claiborne spoke several times about how his faith influences his actions. He mentioned Bible stories and scripture. He claimed that his Christian background provides the basis for his beliefs although he enjoys collaborating with people of all faiths (Claiborne, 2010). Based on his words, it is apparent that he looks to Jesus as a role model for the ideal leader. Jesus is one of the most influential leaders of all time. However, he did not come to Earth as a powerful king as many people expected. His birth in the stable perfectly depicts the humility of Jesus' character. He never was proud or boastful. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, interacted with people of low social status, and gracefully forgave the mistakes of others. Jesus was an unusual leader with a humble attitude and gentle spirit.

Humility and pride are popular themes in literature and culture. Among the Greeks, pride or "hubris" was often written about and warned against. For example, Sophocles (440 BCE) addressed pride in his play *Ajax*. His character Ajax feels dishonored and at a loss for not receiving recognition for his efforts when Odysseus receives the award of Achilles' armor instead. Ajax's feelings of dishonor and pride eventually destroy him. Nathan (ed., 2010) writes, "Ajax kills himself because he ultimately loses face by not receiving the armor, and therefore, he feels dishonored in the eyes of his fellow men--loss of face and loss of pride" (p. 104). Pride can distort an individual's priorities and negatively affect decision-making skills. Leaders must not let pride get in the way of doing what is best for the community when dealing with the challenges of leadership.

Humble leadership takes the focus off the leader and places it on the people of the community. Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) believes that a person can be both a servant and a leader. He discusses the idea of being a servant first or a leader first. Somebody who considers

him- or herself a servant first is a natural servant and a more effective leader because he or she is determined to do what is best for others. Being a servant first involves taking the opposite role to being a leader first, because that kind of leader chooses to serve others simply because it is expected (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 374-375). A good leader genuinely desires to put others before himself or herself.

Successful leaders should possess many qualities. Humility and a service-oriented attitude are among the most important qualities that can distinguish mediocre leaders from extraordinary leaders. Service is a type of leadership. It is leadership based on love for others and the belief that people should love their neighbors as themselves. Humility allows leaders to shift the focus from their own needs to what is really important--the lives of other people.

References

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