

Leadership: Moving from Confidence to Faith

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I didn't know where I was headed, but I was leading. It was single-minded aimlessness.

At the ripe old age of 19, armed with an 'A' Levels certificate and 9 months of skills training in the Officer Cadet School, I was made to feel equipped to lead my platoon of 30 soldiers. As a full time national serviceman accorded the rank of Second Lieutenant, I was taking my troops through jungle terrain in Brunei on a three- day navigation exercise. The year was 1978.

After a day and a half of walking, compass in hand, and pseudo-confident, I had little choice but halt and take stock. Along the way I had constant reminders from my more experienced sergeant that we appeared to be off-course and "lost". I ignored them. Why did I need to heed his advise when I was his "boss", formally trained and qualified to lead – didn't matter that he was two years older than I, was a professional soldier and had trained in the same jungle at least twice before.

Even if I had a nagging feeling right through that I didn't know where we were, I wasn't about to let them know it and lose my "authority", let alone lose face. Besides, they had no choice but to follow, simply because I could make them do so.

Tiredness and fear of recrimination from my superiors eventually forced me to halt and admit to my troops that "perhaps we could have deviated somewhat". Even though they were tired and exasperated, seated cross-legged on the muddy ground, my soldiers humoured me with regimented loyalty. Grudgingly, I asked if any of them had any ideas, suggestions.

One private soldier raised his hand and proceeded to make his point in a confident yet measured tone. I was seriously bothered by his audacity: that he could even think that he was smarter than a trained officer who was supremely better educated than he was. I did my 'A' levels in Raffles Institution; he didn't make it past primary school.

The soldier proceeded to say that he believes we had deviated enough to get us close to where we started the exercise. I was outraged. Transcending my shameless attempts at intimidation, he explained how we could use the method commonly known as triangulation to accurately identify our location. With my permission he proceeded to execute his plan with the help of two other soldiers. It worked.

Overwhelmed by emotions of humiliation that turned to humility, I called him up, put my arm around him, looked him in the eye and said the first sensible thing in a long while – that I was sorry I had doubted him. I shared with the troops the feelings of inadequacy and fear that had tormented me from the start of the exercise.

I knew instinctively it was a point of inflexion for me – I couldn't possibly go forward as their platoon commander if I didn't come clean. I took a chance. They listened in silence. My sergeant then said to me, "Thank you, sir, for being so honest. We respect you and will follow you. We will make it!" Through a spontaneous cheer, the troops echoed the sentiment. That was the first time I truly felt I was their leader – where I didn't need to remind myself of my education or my officer training to prop myself up. I knew the new level of trust we achieved would allow us to accept each other better, and to forgive, forget and give each other the benefit of the doubt when things went awry.

I have taken the time to share this episode because it was my first and most crucial lesson in leadership – a lesson that no formal training could have taught me. It had to be imbibed through experience and a willingness to trust enough to expose myself, warts and all.

There are essentially three key points in this lesson. First, that leadership is not correlated to educational qualifications, technical skills or rank and position. Second, that leaders are self-assured enough to have their ideas and actions be scrutinised. Third, that true leaders are good listeners because they have genuine respect for others and don't assume they have a monopoly on wisdom.

Professor Howard Gardner's seminal book on "multiple intelligences" makes the point that people possess different types of intelligence, and societies short-change themselves when they focus on one type of intelligence (usually intellectual intelligence) rendering all others subservient to it. By extension of this argument,

societies that fail to recognise the different manifestations of leadership – relating to the different types of intelligence – pay a price, especially in the long term.

In Singapore, we have, for too long, placed academic and technocratic prowess above other abilities. This has led to a process in the public sector and Government Linked Companies (GLCs) that self-selects those with an academic track record for leadership positions. Consequently, many with natural leadership ability or with the potential to lead, but are not academically as good, don't get enough of an opportunity to lead. One can draw a possible correlation between academic abilities and being a manager, especially one who needs domain knowledge. However, the correlation between academic abilities and leadership is tenuous. The terms 'manager' and 'leader' are used synonymously. They are very different.

It is said that managers are pre-occupied with “getting it right” while leaders are driven by “doing the right thing”. Getting it right is a function of skills and domain knowledge, while doing the right thing is predicated on values and having the right attitude. These values include feeling accountable, being self-assured enough to be honest and willing to be judged, and having a belief system that forms the basis of moral courage to go against the grain where necessary. Managers usually operate in a quantifiable, black and white sphere, while leaders are comfortable dealing with grey.

Essentially, managers thrive in what I would term the “confidence” paradigm while leaders operate in the “faith” paradigm.

When we say we have confidence in a person, it usually refers to us feeling assured that he or she has the requisite knowledge, skills and wherewithal to accomplish the assigned task. Concomitantly, when you apply the same measure to an organisation, for example, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), you usually mean it is well organised, armed with credible equipment and technological prowess, and the troops are well trained.

Faith, on the other hand, is something that is less empirically evidenced. It is a deeper idea, a concept, so to speak, which is hard to foster, but once you have it you tend to jealously guard it. This is why, when we have faith in something or someone, we tend to make excuses for them when things go wrong. So, in the case of the SAF, when we say we have faith we are referring to trusting it to be an organisation

committed to doing the right thing. For example, even though it has immense powers, you trust the SAF will not abuse it whether it's about calling up national servicemen for training or in spending tax payers' money.

Based on my observations and experience, faith is based essentially on three qualities that people have come to value:

- credibility – saying what you mean and doing what you say
- integrity – being authentic, honest and demonstrating accountability
- likeability – conducting yourself in a manner that's palatable and positive.

When these qualities are not just espoused but demonstrated in a constant and consistent manner, whether you are an individual, a group, or an organisation, you tend to have people gravitate toward you with admiration and trust. This in turn, strengthens loyalty – something that is usually not a fair weather concept.

Today we appear to have a crisis of leadership.

Don't get me wrong - managers *are* important. In fact, they are vital for the smooth functioning of systems, organisations and socio-political entities. But, somewhere along the way, in the enthusiasm for efficiency and quick results, we seem to have ignored the need to identify, encourage and nurture leaders. Admittedly this is likely to be more tedious and oftentimes troublesome (as it's not uncommon for leaders to challenge the status quo). Yet it is essential for the long term success, and indeed survivability, of organisations and nation states. Typically, leaders not only provide the vision and come up with fresh ideas on how we can stay relevant, they also have the X-factor to persuade, inspire and charge-up stakeholders to keep the wheels in motion.

In other words, efficient managers, while important, are increasingly no more than a hygiene factor – it is something we expect to see in a competent entity. You need leaders to help differentiate and distinguish by taking the focus to the next level i.e. from what we do, to *what we stand for*.

Organisations that are resilient against competition tend to be those that gain mindshare which in turn sustains market share. And in an increasingly crowded marketplace, product differentiation becomes a challenge. Organisations which rise above the crowd tend to be positioned beyond what they do – the products and

services they offer. They stand for something – usually something that their leaders stand for, and believe in. The late Anita Roddick did this for The Body Shop. I am convinced that a key reason why there is so much loyalty for its products is not just because of their quality, but because for many, buying or using a Body Shop product is a statement that you too are against animal testing. Similarly, OSIM has come to be seen not just as a company that sells massage chairs, but as one that believes in health and fitness. Its founder, Ron Sim, a triathlete, is the impetus for this.

As we become increasingly disillusioned with what's happening around us, we want to be associated with a cause, to give greater meaning and purpose to our lives. This is especially so for youth. Leaders make this happen.

Barrack Obama is a classic example of a statesman leader whose credibility, integrity and likeability proved to be a potent combination. This allowed him to win the US Presidential race even though he was a virtual unknown before 2008. More importantly, he has given reason for the American people to regain belief and renew hope. This appeared a near impossible task just months ago, not only for Americans but for the global community at large. Was it his technical competence that did it? Did he come up with a plan that was particularly ingenious to tackle the economic woes, or the healthcare issues? It was because he presented himself as a person committed to doing the right thing. If you ask me, the acid test won't be so much whether he succeeds in turning the economy around fast enough, but whether he wavers from his commitment to doing the right thing. We are already seeing evidence of people in the USA and other parts of the world standing by Obama in the wake of growing criticism against his policies in the economic and war front. After George W. Bush it was not easy for the American people to trust the system or the President. Now that they have found reason to have faith in Obama, they will guard it jealously until he breaks it not on the basis of technical competence but the values for which they chose him. This shift to the faith paradigm is what will give the USA the best chance to regain its position in the global arena.

Nation states and organisations can learn from this.

You may ask, "So how does one become a leader?" I subscribe to the theory that in most cases leaders are born with the DNA to lead. But this does not mean that others can't become better leaders than what we are today. How to get there is a topic that requires a lengthy discussion beyond my remit for this article. Suffice to say that the

sooner in life we move out of our comfort zones and are forced to come to terms with our strengths and limitations, the more we gain a healthy respect for others and for ourselves. It would be ideal if life presents such opportunities naturally for you. If not, be in the company of someone who pushes you, challenges you – this could be a friend, a colleague or a professional coach.

In short, we need to give more people – especially young people – opportunities to discover the leader in themselves. For this we need to rethink the way we identify, nurture and inspire individuals for stewardship. More significantly, we would need to ensure that the environment is conducive for those with the potential to stand-out naturally and not fall between the cracks accidentally or by design. Especially in societies where the pool is small, we need to cast the net wide and not just select those with one type of intelligence or talent. Remember my army story – while you may need skills and qualifications to become a manager, you could be a natural leader regardless of rank or education.

So, if you are a school teacher or principal, why not take the chance - choose the maverick over the straight 'A' student to become the head prefect. If you are the Chairman of a company, why not create an environment that encourages and rewards employees who stand for something and are prepared to 'fight' for it. If you are a political leader try looking beyond domain knowledge and technical competency when planning for succession. Good leaders are self- assured enough to seek out mavericks, and those with the gumption and moral courage to challenge them – and it is usually such picks that have the conviction to persuade and carry the ground.

So, do we have what it takes to do the right thing? We need to have faith.
