

A Short Speech on Leadership

By Tom Coyne

Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about leadership – an issue that is absolutely central to our ability to thrive in a world of increasing complexity and accelerating change.

Let me start with the big picture. Since humans first banded together on the east African plain eons ago, evolutionary selection has primarily operated on groups, not individuals. Teams win and lose. Companies succeed and fail. And nations and empires rise and fall. For this reason, group leadership is critical.

To survive and thrive, every organization must competently execute four processes. Three of them are relatively easy to describe.

- Strategy is about sensemaking and design. The former seeks to identify the key elements in the situation facing an organization, how they are related, and how they are likely to evolve in the future. The result is assumptions that form the basis for the design process – determining how to achieve desired goals with available means.
- Execution implements this strategic design, by developing objectives, metrics, plans, budgets, processes, systems, organization and mechanisms to provide feedback and drive adaptation.
- Finally, risk management ensures survival by identifying and assessing risks and uncertainties, providing warning of adverse changes, mitigating and transferring loss exposures, and strengthening organizational resilience and adaptive capabilities.

However, excellent strategy, execution, and risk management alone won't deliver survival and success. They need leadership to integrate and animate them. But just what is leadership about?

At the most basic level, we need to distinguish between dominance and leadership. In some groups, a dominant individual will seize power and assert control. This is the world of animal herds, of palace intrigue, authoritarian dictatorships, and mafia families. However, while these situations all make for great television, dominance isn't leadership. Rather, over the years I've become more focused on the nature of leadership as a relationship – an honor that is bestowed upon a person by followers who are willing to place their trust in them.

The key question thus becomes what are the qualities in a person that cause others to trust him or her with the leadership of their group? Framed this way, the question becomes timeless, and as applicable to hunter-gather groups on the east African savannah eons ago, as it is to military, government, nonprofit, or corporate groups today. Based on my studies and experience over the years, I have concluded that a simple model captures the three key traits people require in order to bestow the mantle of leadership on someone.

- First, people look for integrity – confidence that a person will do the right thing, with the best interest of the group in mind, even when that may not be in the leader's own self-interest. As a practical matter, this integrity is embodied in the leader's behavior. For example, leaders with integrity a comfortable adding people more talented than

themselves to a team. And when things go wrong, they take responsibility, rather than throwing subordinates under the proverbial bus, or blaming failure on unforeseeable events. Make no mistake: leadership is an honor that often requires sacrifice.

- Second, people look for competence – a leader must have the skill to assess a situation and either directly take, or indirectly organize, the sequence decisions and actions required to ensure the group's survival and the achievement its larger goals. A leader also needs to be able to perform under pressure, to be resilient when adversely surprised, and to have the grit and persistence to overcome obstacles. Finally, a leader has to strike an appropriate balance between the optimism needed to inspire their team, and the hubris and overconfidence that leads to failure.
- And third, a leader must have empathy for the people who have entrusted him or her with the leadership of their group. Leaders authentically care about their people. You can't fake this; evolution has endowed people with a very strong ability to tell the difference between leaders who are authentic, and leaders who are putting on an act. For example, leaders with empathy don't hesitate to liberally share credit for their team's success. And while they praise in public, they only criticize in private, and only do so when they can provide constructive coaching and advice.

So far, so good. But I'm sure that some of you are thinking that there is still something missing from this description of leadership. I agree. There is one last element, and it is critical.

My father used to say that there are only three things a person leaves behind when they die: their children, their creations, and the impact of their actions. And when you are on your deathbed, looking back on your life, actions that serve no higher purpose than maximizing your own wealth and pleasure will look painfully small and insignificant. Most people know this, and either explicitly or intuitively want to be part of a collective purpose that is larger than their own pleasure, that gives meaning to their lives and the passage of time. This is the last aspect of leadership: the ability to define a noble purpose for a group, and to give meaning to every individual's effort.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with the words of U.S. Army General Walter Ulmer:

"What is the essence of a 'good climate' that promotes esprit and gives birth to 'high performing units'? It is probably easier to feel or sense than to describe. It doesn't take long for most experienced people to take its measure. There is a pervasive sense of mission. There is a common agreement on what are the top priorities. There are clear standards. Competence is prized and appreciated. There is a willingness to share information. There is a sense of fair play. There is joy in teamwork. There are quick and convenient ways to attack nonsense and fix aberrations in the system. There is a sure sense of rationality and trust. The key to this climate is leadership in general, and senior leadership in particular."

While General Ulmer wrote these words in 1986, they are no less applicable today, when the world needs good leaders more than ever.

Thank you, and good luck.