

Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?

September 25, 2000

In these times of "empowered" followers, write Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones in the *Harvard Business Review*, executives who look beyond the most obvious qualities of leadership will find surprising characteristics that truly inspirational leaders share.

by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones

If you want to silence a room of executives, try this small trick. Ask them, "Why would anyone want to be led by you?" We've asked just that question for the past ten years while consulting for dozens of companies in Europe and the United States. Without fail, the response is a sudden, stunned hush. All you can hear are knees knocking.

Executives have good reason to be scared. You can't do anything in business without followers, and followers in these "empowered" times are hard to find. So executives had better know what it takes to lead effectively—they must find ways to engage people and rouse their commitment to company goals. But most don't know how, and who can blame them? There's simply too much advice out there. Last year alone, more than 2,000 books on leadership were published, some of them even repackaging Moses and Shakespeare as leadership gurus.

We've yet to hear advice that tells the whole truth about leadership. Yes, everyone agrees that leaders need vision, energy, authority, and strategic direction. That goes without saying. But we've discovered that inspirational leaders also share four unexpected qualities:

- They selectively show their weaknesses. By exposing some vulnerability, they reveal their approachability and humanity.
- They rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of their actions. Their ability to collect and interpret soft data helps them know just when and how to act.
- They manage employees with something we call tough empathy. Inspirational leaders empathize passionately—and realistically—with people, and they care intensely about the work employees do.
- They reveal their differences. They capitalize on what's unique about themselves.

You may find yourself in a top position without these qualities, but few people will want to be led by you.

Our theory about the four essential qualities of leadership, it should be noted, is not about results per se. While many of the leaders we have studied and use as examples do in fact post superior financial returns, the focus of our research has been on leaders who excel at inspiring people—in capturing hearts, minds, and souls. This ability is not everything in business, but any experienced leader will tell you it is worth quite a lot. Indeed, great results may be impossible without it.

Our research into leadership began some 25 years ago and has followed three streams since then. First, as academics, we ransacked the prominent leadership theories of the past century to develop our own working model of effective leadership. (For more on the history of leadership thinking, see the sidebar "[Leadership: A Small History of a Big Topic](#).") Second, as consultants, we have tested our theory with thousands of executives in workshops worldwide and through observations with dozens of clients. And third, as executives ourselves, we have vetted our theories in our own organizations.

Some surprising results have emerged from our research. We learned that leaders need all four qualities to be truly inspirational; one or two qualities are rarely sufficient. Leaders who shamelessly promote their differences but who conceal their weaknesses, for instance, are usually ineffective—nobody wants a perfect leader. We also learned that the interplay between the four qualities is critical. Inspirational leaders tend to mix and match the qualities in order to find the right style for the right moment. Consider humor, which can be very effective as a difference. Used properly, humor can communicate a leader's charisma. But when a leader's sensing skills are not working, timing can be off and inappropriate humor can make someone seem like a joker or, worse, a fool. Clearly, in this case, being an effective leader means knowing what difference to use and when. And that's no mean feat, especially when the end result must be authenticity.

Four Popular Myths About Leadership

Everyone can be a leader.

Not true. Many executives don't have the self-knowledge or the authenticity necessary for leadership. And self-knowledge and authenticity are only part of the equation. Individuals must also want to be leaders, and many talented employees are not interested in shouldering that responsibility. Others prefer to devote more time to their private lives than to their work. After all, there is more to life than work, and more to work than being the boss.

Leaders deliver business results.

Not always. If results were always a matter of good leadership, picking leaders would be easy. In every case, the best strategy would be to go after people in companies with the best results. But clearly, things are not that simple. Businesses in quasi-monopolistic industries can often do very well with competent management rather than great leadership. Equally, some well-led businesses do not necessarily produce results, particularly in the short term.

People who get to the top are leaders.

Not necessarily. One of the most persistent misperceptions is that people in leadership positions are leaders. But people who make it to the top may have done so because of political acumen, not necessarily because of true leadership quality. What's more, real leaders are found all over the organization, from the executive suite to the shop floor. By definition, leaders are simply people who have followers, and rank doesn't have much to do with that. Effective military organizations like the U.S. Navy have long realized the importance of developing leaders throughout the organization.

Leaders are great coaches.

Rarely. A whole cottage industry has grown up around the teaching that good leaders ought to be good coaches. But that thinking assumes that a single person can both inspire the troops and impart technical skills. Of course, it's possible that great leaders may also be great coaches, but we see that only occasionally. More typical are leaders like Steve Jobs whose distinctive strengths lie in their ability to excite others through their vision rather than through their coaching talents.

....

Excerpted from the article "Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?" in the **Harvard Business Review**, September-October 2000.

[[Order the full article](#)]

Robert Goffee is a professor of organizational behavior at London Business School.

Gareth Jones is the director of human resources and internal communications at the British Broadcasting Corporation and a former professor of organizational development at Henley Management College in Oxfordshire, England. Goffee and Jones are the founding partners of Creative Management Associates, an organizational consulting firm in London.