

The Myths and Mysteries of Leadership

Uncovering the myths and mysteries of leadership can assist our development as leaders. Perhaps this article will raise some eyebrows, generate questions, and inspire “but what about” discussions.

Leaders focus on the future (what can be) and then find the path to that future. Leaders build the capacity of people to accomplish the strategic direction.

Leaders share, collaborate, empower, communicate, and inspire. Leaders assess themselves, find their role, and continue to learn. There are many definitions of leadership; simply put: Leadership is the act of learning and using one’s attributes and skills to develop and align human and other resources to accomplish extraordinary things.

Attributes are internal characteristics we bring to or develop and apply to leadership. Essential examples include service, integrity, compassion, transparency, inquiry, balance, courage, passion, collaboration, communication, and awareness (Kouzes & Posner 2007).

Skills we learn include people management, business acumen, time and tasking, planning, evaluation,

meeting management, systems perspective, culture building, and other skills depending on the leadership position, responsibilities, and organization (Locke 1991, McReynolds 1994).

Grounded in the above definitions, let’s explore and interpret a variety of common myths and mysteries of leadership.

1. There are born leaders. FALSE

There are only born wannabe leaders. There are personality styles that see themselves as natural leaders, but it does not mean they have the attributes and/or skills to be leaders. There is a personality type with the motto, “I cannot not lead.” Often charismatic individuals are mistakenly identified and embraced as leaders solely based on their charisma. All personality types can become leaders, but none are born as leaders. Leadership is a developmental process, not an inherited trait or right (Antonakis, 2004; Conger, 1992; Locke 1991).

2. Once a leader, always a leader. TRUE

This is a trick question because being a leader does not always mean taking the upfront or visible leadership role. Sometimes leaders need to be followers, which means a leader is not always in a leadership role. There are times when it is appropriate to step back and let other leaders emerge. Knowing when to step back, develop,

and support others rather than being the leader is, in fact, evidence of leadership. A leader understands their limitations or sees opportunities for others to grow.

Years ago, I was facilitating a team workshop and a participant named Alex always stepped up to lead the team activity. At the start of the third activity, Alex stepped up and began to lead the group, suddenly paused and exclaimed, “Wait, I have no idea how to solve this challenge, someone else should lead.” Others quickly stepped in and the team succeeded. In the debrief Alex shared they had learned that they should not always be the leader. If Alex continued from that point in their job with that awareness, then they are practicing leadership without always having to be the person in front of the room. (Bennis & Nanus, 1978; Schmitz, 2012; Straw, 2013).

3. Leaders seek power. TRUE

At a professional workshop, a panel of leaders discussed the concept of power. The male leaders explained they avoided using power while the women leaders explained that they sought power. Avoid power, seek power? There are two different kinds of power in organizations (McReynolds, 2020). The men had defined selfish power and the women had defined social power. Both are correct. In organizations individuals who seek and gain selfish power use that power



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for aggrandizement, positioning, and personal advancement. That power is usually the gain of knowledge and control of resources and not sharing either of those. In organizations, social power is sought and immediately shared to build the human capacity, and then is used for the mission of the organization, its values, and strategic direction. Leaders seek social power to empower others, which is the definition of empowerment (Greenleaf, 1991; Kouzes & Posner 2007; McReynolds, 2019; Sashkin, 1997; Schein, 2017).

4. Leaders take risks. TRUE

Leaders do take risks but do not carelessly jump off the cliff without knowledge of what is below. While hiking in the Tetons we watched a hang glider with an instructor prepare to jump off the cliff. After several minutes of quiet words, the pair ran to the edge, jumped, and began gliding to the valley below. Risky? Yes, but not foolhardy. There was at least an hour of preparing the equipment, orientation, safety protocols, and mental preparation before the gondola ride up the mountain. The preparation just before the launch was followed by a guided activity. This is the type of risk leaders take to advance the organization. Leaders mitigate risk and know in advance the success of the venture is all but guaranteed (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Locke, 1991).

5. Leaders always have the vision. FALSE

"Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality" (Bennis). Vision is a desired image of the future, its outcomes, and its impact. Leaders know that vision is vital, but leaders should not feel pressure to magically and independently create the vision. It can be a team effort with the leader championing the action for the vision to become reality (McReynolds, 1994; Straw, 2013).

6. There is a best leadership style. FALSE

There is no such thing as a leadership style, there are styles of management.

The fundamental attributes and skills of a leader remain functional in that leader regardless of position or change in organizations. Developing leaders should focus on the core principles of leadership over trying to figure out a style. Discover yourself and your passion and then learn the attributes and skills (Locke, 1991; Hersey, 1984; Menkes, 2005).

7. There are many types of leadership. FALSE

There is a continual publication of books on leadership describing a type of leadership as if it is a new, better, and previously unknown type

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of leadership. Some leadership titles on my bookcase include the terms: Servant, Adaptive, Collaborative, Enlightened, Super, Moral, Visionary, Principle-Centered, Possibilities, Situational, and Strengths. None of these titles represents anything that is not already included in the theory and practice of leadership. Each are valuable to understand that component of leadership, but none represent a separate type or theory (Antonakis, 2004; Locke, 1991).

8. There is good and bad leadership. FALSE

By definition there is only leadership. "Bad leadership" is non-leadership. Often the term bad leadership can be attributed to bad management or someone in authority who is

responsible for leadership but does not demonstrate a leader's attributes and/or skills. All leaders have great days and bad days, and leaders can make great decisions and sometimes horrible decisions. There has never been and never will be a perfect leader, but rather, just leaders embracing their attributes and practicing their skills (Antonakis, 2004; Menkes, 2005).

9. Leadership requires both personal attributes and skills. TRUE

A leader must have an understanding and awareness of both. One can have a graduate degree in leadership and practice all of the fundamental skills, but without the core personal attributes their leadership may fail. One can have all of the core personal attributes, but without skills, their leadership will be unsuccessful (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Locke, 1991).

10. Shared leadership is a new concept. FALSE

By definition, the theory and practice of leadership is already a shared experience. There are trends using the term *shared leadership* for the structure of an organization whereby two or more people share the same position title. This is a style of organizational structure that has its merits but does not guarantee shared leadership in practice (Schmitz, 2012; Straw, 2013).

11. Leadership is never just about an individual. TRUE

"It's tough being a leader when no one is following." Sometimes we attribute special emphasis on individuals and their special abilities. We see this demonstrated in pop culture books that are usually written by corporate leaders describing their special approach. This brings too much focus on one person and forgets that leadership does not happen in a vacuum. Everyone working with the leader is as important to the success of leadership as the leader themselves. Leaders do have a passion for people to be successful. This does not mean the leader is all hugs, smiles, and

warm fuzzies, but rather it means the leader appreciates, develops, and embraces the diversity and talents of all others in the organization (Burns, 1978; Covey, 1991; McReynolds, 1995).

12. Learning leadership is a life-long process. TRUE

Leadership development is continuous so there is no final academic degree or decree by experience that defines the end point. Leaders know that living is learning and transfer all kinds of life experiences into their leadership. One must have the core attributes but may never have expertise in all the skills, so leaders build support networks to attain the vision (Brown, 2018; McReynolds, 1994; Vaill, 1996).

13. Leaders develop leaders. TRUE

A leader takes heart and action to develop other leaders as part of their life-long role. Leaders don't wait until late in their career but become mentors for the profession (not a specific position) as soon as they begin serving in a leadership capacity. In our profession we do not often do this well, not because of avoidance but we often lack time, duty assignment, or skills. A leader's role mentors the next age of leadership, including:

- Encouraging emerging leaders to discover a variety of interests.
- Helping emerging leaders explore their own interests and passions.
- Involving emerging leaders to practice their strengths and limitations.
- Engaging emerging leaders into meaningful and developmental roles.

With more attention to developing future leaders we can assure quality from within our profession (Antonakis, 2004; Burns, 1978; Schmitz, 2012).

Embrace your passion, discover your personal attributes, and develop your professional skills with and for the people around you. This is neither a

myth nor mystery; it's just the path to becoming a leader and practicing leadership.

For More Information

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