

Lead, Follow, *AND* Get Out Of The Way

ACHIEVERSHP: A NEW PARADIGM FOR GETTING THINGS DONE
TOGETHER
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My sophomore year of college, I had an experience in a psychology class that would fundamentally change the way I felt about myself. We'd all taken the Myers Briggs Type Inventory and while discussing the results, I had two realizations. First, I was an INFP – introvert, intuitive, feeling, and perceiving. Or as they labeled it, "*The Empath*"; a descriptor that rang true for me. Second, I noted that all four of the traits I embodied were those deemed "unpreferred" in American culture. As a society, we value extroversion (outward focus), sensing (concreteness), thinking (facts) and judging (deciding quickly). Perhaps because of this, only about 1% of the population shares my personality profile.

You'd think that this second realization would've been discouraging, but it wasn't. First of all, the fact that I was a personality minority wasn't news. From being an ethnic minority of mixed ancestry, both LGBT and drawn toward spirituality, being left-handed, highly sensitive to the feelings of others, and having spent nearly a third of my younger years ill with everything from asthma to epilepsy, to being a glasses-wearing comic book geek and folk music-lover, and being one of 400 African American students on a campus of 20,000, I'd long known what it meant to be an outlier. But what the inventory gave me was a sense of place; even if INFPs are as few as they claimed, I was a type. There were others who moved through the world in similar ways. But there was one aspect of the Myers Briggs that I'd have to contend with for many years to come, and that was whether the fact that I was INFP disqualified me from leading; whether I was "leadership material".

According to the inventory, ESTJs, in every way, the opposite of me, were natural leaders. In fact, back when I took it, "*The Leader*" was even how this type was labeled. In the same ways that we were taught about race, gender and sexuality, most of us were taught about leadership; that it's this rare and mysteriously elusive quality that only certain persons possess; something in our blood, or genes. Leadership, we're taught, is the byproduct of innate traits; a potent mix of nobility, ambition and charisma, of fearlessness, physicality and decisiveness. And that of all the traits, this one is the most noble. But in many ways, that's no different from saying that only tall, blond, light-skinned, blue-eyed people are beautiful.

Much of our modern understanding of leadership can be traced back to the Allied victory in WW II, and the personalities that made it possible. (We gloss over the fact that leaders on the other side of the battlefield possessed many of those same traits.) By the 1960s, our definition of both what leadership is and who's eligible to engage in it had been so intensely redacted that there was little room for the likes of Harriet Tubman or Helen Keller, John Nash or James Baldwin. We'd call what they did by other names; teaching, organizing, managing, activism, strategizing, guiding, and so forth; anything but leading. But like all other aspects of human experience, leadership is infused with diversity. It doesn't look one way, nor is it one thing.

Further, imagine that the word "leader" doesn't describe a certain type of person, but is a label that applies to anyone when they're doing the leading; not a trait, but rather, a role. This one small shift allows us to recognize how leadership isn't reserved for the select few; for the ESTJs, the Pattons and Churchills, the white-identifying, male, Christian heterosexuals of the world with no readily visible disabilities and ample

amounts of charisma; but is something anyone can do, and is, in fact, something that everyone, throughout their life, *does* do.

Malcolm X, in *The Ballot or the Bullet*, described how even the idea of the Civil Rights movement could be unintentionally restricted and that the only way people like him could be involved was to broaden the construct. “That old interpretation excluded us,” he would say. “It kept us out. So, we’re giving a new interpretation to the civil-rights struggle, an interpretation that will enable us to come into it, take part in it.” We need to do a similar thing to leadership, beginning with the four ways in which the construct itself has been rendered exclusive:

1. *Leadership had been venerated* – We’ve wrongly elevated leadership above followership and partnership; creating an incentive to hold on to the role even when doing so endangers or compromises the effectiveness of the endeavor itself. In reality, all three are merely means to a desired shared end. Our propensity toward leader-worship shifts our orientation from *appropriateness* (person likely to get us where we need to go) toward *stylistics* and the cult of personality.

2. *Leadership had been romanticized* – We think of leadership as some mysterious mix of superhuman traits that set the few apart from the rest of us; conflating leadership with assertiveness, extroversion, willfulness, etc. When we romanticize leadership, we confuse attractiveness (people we’re drawn to) with capableness (people who can get us where we’re going). The right person to lead in one context can easily be, and almost always is, better suited for a followership or partnership role in the next.

3. *Leadership had been rarefied* – The image of our ideal leader is much like our image of God; male, straight and Caucasian (not to mention tall, right-handed, domineering and a full head of good hair). They likely come from a long line of “leaders”; influential and powerful men of high birth, and showed signs of being extraordinary early on – e.g. – they couldn’t lie when confronted about chopping down the cherry tree. The closer one fits this archetype, the more likely one will be deemed a leader. But despite what we’ve been told, there simply is no leader gene. If the gifts of the gods are distributed across all humanity, then everyone has something to offer.

4. *Leadership had been militarized* – In ROTC, we were required to memorize the definition of leadership: “The process of influencing and directing men in such a way as to obtain their willing obedience, confidence, respect and loyal cooperation in order to accomplish the mission.” Over the years, the two words that stood out most were “process” and “mission”. Because leadership is exactly that; a process. It’s a means to achieving a particular end, as are followership and partnership. Which leads to the second word, “mission”. That’s the end these various processes, or means, are working to achieve.

Militarized leadership relies on strict adherence to the chain of command; meaning the person in charge has full decision authority; regardless of whether they’re the right person to make the call, or the call they’re making is the right one. Sure, we have provisions in place to ostensibly counteract

the blind following of orders, but they're practically impossible to apply. Then, there are all manner of contexts where in the real world this style of leadership doesn't work; boards of directors and supreme courts, commissions and coalitions, communities and families. In none of these is leading by issuing orders appropriate.

The key lesson is that it's what we accomplish through coordinated effort that actually matters. What we need is a new paradigm for understanding how, together, we get things done; one that's universally inclusive, and that allows for role fluidity; agile shifting between leadership, followership and partnership as needed. We're fond of the saying, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way". But what we need is a different framework; one where we're all committed to leading, following, and getting out of the way. And the higher the hurdles and the stakes – the more complex and dynamic the uncertainty – the more important this new paradigm becomes. That's what's meant here by "*Achievership*".

In The G Quotient, author Kirk Snyder, based on a five-year study, revealed that organizations and working units led by gay-identifying people were collectively experiencing 35% higher levels of employee engagement, job satisfaction, and workplace morale, in addition to stronger employer loyalty and individual productivity. He credits this to their innate understanding of diversity, their valuing of individuality, their ability to foster inclusivity and bring teams together. Similarly, Sharon Hadary and Laura Henderson, in How Women Lead, found that women not only tend to lead differently than men, but that when they bring their own form of leadership to the table, they, and their companies, do exceptionally well. And finally, numerous studies have identified the extraordinary levels of resilience, agility, innovation, motivation and emotional intelligence that ethnic minorities confer on teams they lead; qualities that, over time, come to characterize the entire team.

Long before he was governor, my friend Jessica introduced me to her friend Gavin, back when he was an upstart contender for mayor of San Francisco. She, among other things, liked that Gavin was of our generation, shared our sensibilities, and that he was unmarried yet not even remotely apologetic about living with his girlfriend; back then, something that few politicians did. Jessica and her boyfriend were doing the same, and both couples were among those who'd committed to not even consider marriage until their gay and lesbian friends could also marry. These struck a chord with me as well, but what I loved most was how, even back then, he was open about his dyslexia. He said that despite the challenges it had posed throughout his life, contending with it had made him a harder worker, a better listener, a stronger speaker, and perhaps most importantly, able to empathize with other people who didn't fit the mold.

People who have embraced their diversity tend to be less attached to titles or hierarchy, nor do they always need to be in charge. They understand that they're not the appropriate person to be in the lead all the time. They intuitively grasp why being just as good at following and partnering as leading is important. This is actually the only way that a government "of, by and for the people" can conceivably work. The more diversity we have access to, the more strengths we get to draw from. So, the senator, CEO or religious official who participates in the community outreach event planned by someone else recognizes that they, despite their title, are not there as leader, but as a follower, and should be the first to say, "Tell me what you want me to do."

This isn't new. We do it automatically in medical emergencies, when no one questions whether the person who knows how to save lives, irrespective of anything else about them, is in charge. Or the pilot on a plane, or the wilderness guide on an expedition. But this is how we should function in every situation; leading, following and partnering as best suits what we want to achieve. The process itself is more holistic, sustainable, attainable, flexible, versatile, and responsible than the "charismatic leader" paradigm that's persisted for the last century.

Achievership means focusing on getting the problem solved; not being the one who's credited with solving it. It means distributing authority and responsibility throughout the collective, allowing who's in the lead to shift as quickly and frequently as necessary, and tapping into the strengths each person brings; irrespective of age, gender, racial or sexual identity, faith tradition, appearance, ability or disability, or any other aspect of diversity. A leadership fixation puts the focus on the person. Achievership is about the people. The former makes us want to maintain control; the latter, to share it. Leadership, along with followership and partnership, are ingredients for making something better. But when empowered by our own unique mix of difference, and directed by a desire to make a difference, what we're able to accomplish together is astounding.

But one doesn't have to be an ethnic minority, identify as LGBTQ+, be female, or have a disability to both embrace one's diversity and put it to work through the achievership paradigm. Just ask Flint MI sheriff Chris Swanson, who, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide protests over African American deaths at the hands of the police, took an entirely different approach. Instead of escalating aggression or falling back on his designated authority, Sheriff Swanson did something remarkable: Faced with angry and grieving protestors, he took off his helmet, put down his baton and asked the people of his community how he could help (followership). They chanted, "Walk with us," so that's exactly what he did (partnership). For over a mile, he walked alongside them in solidarity. This is how we solve the tough problems, how we achieve, and, together, how we sustain.

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