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Maturity Makes Great Leaders



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There is a pressing need for intelligent leaders who are able to deal effectively with today's challenges and demands—and those of the future. But intelligence alone is not sufficient. It is simply a "blunt" tool that enables leaders to get things done. Too often leaders are intelligence giants but maturity dwarfs. This has far reaching, detrimental consequences.

Leadership maturity is a leader's ability to engage consistently with him or herself, others and the world by being:

- Relevant: maturity is time, place and person dependent. It demands the ability to render wise judgments about what is appropriate in different settings
- Productive: constructive contributions are made, and something meaningful and value adding emerges.
- Uplifting: interactions are positive, fulfilling and Enriching

Acquiring leadership maturity is a lifelong journey that comprises successive stages. At each stage, leaders will develop a corresponding identity. Depending on how they process life events and experiences, they may spiral upwards to greater maturity or downwards to lesser maturity. Or, they may get stuck for the rest of their life at one level.

Leadership Maturity: A Lifelong Journey

Physical and physiological maturity proceeds relatively automatically as one ages. But psychosocial-spiritual maturity is an arduous, open-ended and multifaceted journey of "ripening" holistically. It is fraught with unpredictability and ambiguity.

Five stages or thresholds can be distinguished in the process of maturation. A higher stage reframes a lower stage and successive stages may overlap. Each stage typically lasts for ten years. So, all other things being equal, leaders only reach full maturity in their late 40s or early 50s, if ever.

Migration to a new stage also depends on successfully resolving the challenges and issues unique to a stage. Unresolved challenges and issues are carried over into adult life as one ages, where they remain active as baggage because the leader has remained stuck at the stage.

Building inter alia on the views of Steinberg and Cauffman, Cook-Greuter, Du Toit, Loevinger, and Rooke and Torbet, here are the five

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successive maturity stages.

The Five Stages of Leadership Maturity

Stage 1: Confident Ability

In this stage a prospective leader develops a positive, healthy self-image and self-confidence, along with a firm belief in a basic “I can” competence.

He explores and discovers what his abilities are and how to apply them; how to satisfy his needs constructively; how to handle his emotions appropriately; and what is right and wrong. He also builds the courage to take risks confidently.

At the end of this stage the leader has an “identity of self-worth”. But if a person gets stuck at this stage, he will have the baggage of seeking constant approval from others because his self-worth has not been affirmed. He will lack confidence and will continuously be seeking security and predictability. He may also have an unclear sense of what is right and wrong.

One example of such “stuckness” is Alexander the Great, who asked on his deathbed: Did I meet with your approval, father?

Another is American automobile executive Lee Iacocca who, according to psychologist Carol Dweck, sought the ongoing approval of Henry Ford III while at Ford Motor Company in his burning desire to emulate Ford.

Stage 2: Egocentric Satisfaction

Here the prospective leader gains the insight that she is embedded in relations with others and the world. She realises that she must fend for herself, but that she needs others to satisfy her interests and needs. But she is only driven in reaching out to others to satisfy her own, immediate needs. She is in competition with others in a win-lose equation of “me first” at all times. Because she is driving her own agenda, the prospective leader questions all rules and authority that may prevent her from achieving her ends. Though she acts manipulatively and opportunistically to get her own way, she may also ostensibly conform if this will serve her self-interests.

At the end of this stage the leader has an “identity of consumption”. A leader stuck at this stage will have the baggage of always single-mindedly striving to satisfy her personal needs and interests, regardless of costs and circumstances.

Examples of “stuckness” here are the greedy Wall Street bankers who caused the 2008/09 global recession, aptly illustrated by the “Wolf of Wall Street”, Jordan Belfort.

Stage 3: Personal Differentiation

Here the leader realises that, to get anywhere, he must stand out in his interactions with others and the world. He seeks to find his own voice and to distinguish himself as unique, with invaluable, rare talents and abilities. He believes and claims that others and the world must be overjoyed that he honours them with his invaluable contribution. Everyone and everything is measured against his set of personalised standards.

At the end of this stage the leader has an “identity of uniqueness”. The leader stuck at this stage will have baggage of proclaiming ad nauseam that he is the indispensable saviour of the world. Examples include Albert Dunlop, the US “chain saw” turnaround specialist, who repeatedly stated “I’m a superstar,” and Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling at Enron.

See Also: [Healthcare Leadership Crisis: the Canadian Solution](#)

Stage 4: Communal

Here the leader realises that she cannot make her unique contribution without the help of others if objectives, dreams and legacies greater than herself are to be pursued and achieved. She realises she must move from placing “me” at the centre of everything, to placing “us” centrally. This is about finding win-win ways in which everyone’s abilities and contributions count equally. It is about the pursuit of a shared future for herself and others. There must be shared accountability for everything and everyone.

At the end of this stage the leader has an “identity of envisioning”. The leader stuck here would carry the baggage of pushing for the parochial realisation of organisation-specific dreams, while ignoring the bigger context and dreams of other organisations, communities and greater society.

Examples in this case would be business leaders who have built massive empires with the attitude of “business is for business”, like Jack Welch of General Electric, Steve Jobs of Apple, and Lou Gerstner of IBM.

Stage 5: A Higher Calling

In this stage the leader moves beyond shared but narrow, organisation-specific objectives to higher purposes and meanings. He searches for what lies behind shared objectives, dreams and legacies. It is about finding the final “why” and “where to” to be served by the shared pursuit.

He has a growing transcendental consciousness infused by truth, beauty and righteousness. It is, for him, about the common good for all humanity. It is about timeless, multifaceted, meaningful answers instead of one-dimensional, time-restricted, pragmatic solutions.

Posing the right questions comes first, followed by finding the right answers. In his pursuit no assumptions, beliefs and values are sacred. Paradoxes and dilemmas are accepted, or integrated at higher and deeper levels of being or becoming.

At the end of this stage the leader has an “identity of meaningfulness”. This is the highest form of leadership authenticity and maturity.

Examples of leaders functioning at this stage, past and present, are Bill Gates through his global humanitarian foundation, as well as political leaders Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. There’s no doubt that humanity needs intelligent and mature leaders with the identity of meaningfulness inspired by a higher calling if we are to secure a desirable, sustainable future for all. Our continued survival is at stake.

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