

# Reidy Associates



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## *Encouraging Reluctant Leaders*

Leadership is a topic loaded with assumptions. One common assumption is that leadership is inherently good and desirable. When examined, this seems ridiculous. Of course it all depends on the aim or goal of the leadership activity. But the mere use of the word “leadership” tends to lend an air of credibility to any enterprise with which it is associated. Luckily, once this assumption is held up for examination, few people have difficulty identifying many examples of bad or undesirable leadership.

Another common assumption is that anyone who holds a position of authority must be a leader, and that people who lack such positions are not leaders. Like the assumption above, this is easily dismissed once people consider individuals whom they consider leaders but have never occupied formal positions of authority and, conversely, people who hold positions of authority yet who have never exercised leadership.

A third assumption which is more difficult to put to rest is the view that leadership is carried out by a person, “the Leader”, who possesses a particular skill set. Included among the skills thought of as constituting leadership are charisma, courage, decisiveness, ability to delegate, time management, and so on. It is not surprising that people often hold this view. Many cultural myths and messages promote a view of leadership based on the hero, the knight in shining armor. The leader/hero has courage, skill, conviction, clarity and he (almost always he) holds the responsibility for rescuing the rest of us from whatever threat we face.

This assumption can have serious consequences, especially for individuals who do not commonly consider themselves leaders but who may actually have much to offer. It is hoped that this essay can serve to en-courage (to give courage to) ordinary people who may have the foundations of leadership but never step forward, and also to offer strategies for those who wish to promote leadership in such persons.

One consequence of the heroic view of leadership is that we become reticent to “step up to the plate” and assume leadership roles because we have bought into an exaggerated and single-dimensional idea of what a leader is like. We think, “I can’t be a leader because I’m deathly afraid of public speaking.” Or, “How can I exercise leadership when I don’t have the: (pick one) college degree, title, solution to the problem, right image?” While we are bogged down in insecurity and self-consciousness around these questions, pressing issues go unaddressed. We waste time and

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valuable energy waiting for someone with more readily apparent qualifications—a hero—to appear and organize us all.

Another way of looking at this is captured in a quote attributed to Jerry Garcia: “Somebody has to do something and it’s incredibly pathetic that it has to be us.” We don’t have to have all the skills, all the answers. We don’t have to have it figured out better than anyone else. We do need to see something that needs attention and be motivated enough to organize a response.

It is this rather accessible way to view leadership that can open up possibilities for a whole array of people to take initiative. I certainly don’t hold the view that “everyone is a leader” or even a potential leader, nor do I believe there is any guarantee that such people will put their leadership efforts toward constructive ends. However, I do worry that many constructive acts of leadership are never initiated because of the hero notion of leadership.

So, is there another way of viewing leadership? I find it helpful to emphasize that leadership is an *activity*, rather than to focus on the leader as a person. In addition, it is useful to stress that personal skills or attributes are but one element of leadership and they are not even the most essential element. In fact, there appear to be at least six elements of leadership.

The first element is the situation or need calling for leadership. Leadership can be exercised in a small arena, such as in a family or on behalf of an individual. It can also be exercised in a community, a state, or an entire country. While the context will affect the complexity of the issues being addressed, the work of leadership remains the same despite the arena in which it is being exercised.

The second element is the motivation or will to exercise leadership from the parties in question. Many pressing issues go unaddressed because there is no person or group who feels sufficiently motivated to exercise leadership on that issue. In fact, this may be the single most important prerequisite for the exercise of leadership. With motivation, people will gain the skills, find the resources, acquire the tools. Without motivation, no leadership will be exercised even if people at hand have all the requisite personal qualities.

Third, constituents: the people being mobilized. Rost talks about leadership consisting of the relationship between leader and followers, and points out that the role of leader is fluid over time and across groups. In other words, one might be the identified leader for a period of time or for a particular initiative, then take on the role of follower or constituent. Similarly, one person can simultaneously play the role of leader and follower in various groups at the same time. However, it is my view that there must be intent and effort to mobilize constituents in order for an activity to be defined as leadership. This sets leadership apart from other actions which may be similar, such as advocacy or role modeling.

The fourth element is character or integrity. This element of leadership is particularly important for the exercise of leadership without threat or coercion. If one is to have willing constituents, there needs to be a relationship of trust. One aspect of trust is the sense that the person or persons exercising leadership are acting with integrity or good character.

The fifth element consists of those personal attributes or skills mentioned earlier: Charisma, decisiveness, courage, and so on. These qualities can be innate or acquired but the important point is that they are but one element of leadership and not the most essential.

Finally, there are other tools or resources for use in exercising leadership. These include such things as power, allies, money, access to experts, formal position, and so on. Like personal attributes or skills, these are not prerequisites for the exercise of leadership, they are merely tools which can be utilized by those who are motivated.

So...how do you prepare yourself when you see a situation that calls for leadership but feel reluctant to step forward? How can you be “en-couraged”? Here are some beginning ideas:

First, sharpen up your motivation. Why do people who’ve had a difficult situation thrust on them assume leadership roles? For many, it’s out of necessity, not because they ever aspired to such roles. Action occurs when motivation is stronger than resistance or reticence.

Second, carefully examine the leadership that is occurring around you, especially acts of leadership that don’t fall into the “leader as hero” mold. Do you see any perfect leaders? Probably not. Do you see people who have somehow managed to organize the elements of leadership in such a way as to make progress? That’s much more likely.

Third, inventory the resources you have and the ones you need. So maybe you aren’t the most charismatic speaker, but you have a colleague who is. Can you work together to communicate the message? Perhaps you lack a formal position or “connections.” Who can you recruit that has those elements? Once one has the motivation the rest can be organized.

Fourth, try not to let your ego get in the way. This is that little voice that’s saying, “I have to do it all myself. I have to know all the answers. I’m not a leader unless I can see the problem AND the solution.” The biggest obstacle to those first few steps of leadership is believing these messages.

Finally, remember that leadership often begins with an uneasiness, a vague, unarticulated sense that things are not quite right but no idea what would be right or how to bring it about. As Ron Heifetz writes, “One may lead perhaps with no more than a question in hand.”