

Twenty-First-Century Leadership: It's All About Values

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by Max Klau

*(Editor's note: This post is part of a six-week blog series on **how leadership might look in the future**. The conversations generated by these posts will help shape the agenda of a symposium on the topic in June 2010, hosted by HBS's **Nitin Nohria, Rakesh Khurana, and Scott Snook**. This week's focus: values.)*

Are values an essential ingredient of leadership?

Amongst those who study such matters, one school of thought says no, that leadership is a simple matter of power and influence, regardless of why or how that power and influence is used. From this perspective, a leader is someone who has followers, and a great leader is someone who has a lot of followers. The matter of whether that leader marches those followers off a cliff or towards a more perfect and sustainable society is secondary or irrelevant.

*This view leads naturally to what I'll call the "Gandhi/Hitler problem." **Gandhi** had a great many followers, but so did **Hitler**. If leadership is essentially a matter of power and influence, then both individuals must be deemed great by virtue of the fact that they both changed history and influenced the lives of millions. For anyone with a moral compass and respect for human dignity, however, that's an uncomfortable — actually, a repugnant — assertion.*

There is, of course, a different perspective: that leadership is all about values. That in order to understand leadership, you must consider where an individual is going, and why and how he or she is going there. An individual with tremendous influence who offers flawed diagnoses of communal challenges, "solutions" that fail to address real problems, and who operates with a fundamental disrespect for human dignity and interdependence is, actually, not a leader at all. In contrast, an individual whose influence extends no further than immediate family, friends, and local community may well be a leader, if he or she is devoted to improving the human condition — at any scale.

*But whose values, then? And what exactly does it mean to "improve the human condition?" After all, Hitler had values, and saw himself as working for a "better" Germany. Any attempt to assert that some values should be elevated over others generates controversy and debate, creating a quagmire of **moral relativism**. Reasonable people may be inclined to throw up their hands and decide to walk away from the values question altogether.*

*That would be a terrible mistake. Here at **City Year**, we insist that it is simply impossible to live and work together without shared values. **Michael Brown**, our CEO and Co-Founder, has written that "without widely held shared values, our society will come apart. In particular, if we do not deliberately provide our young people with powerful, positive values, they will often receive powerful negative values by default."*

*Despite the controversy and debate around values, a strong case can be made that widely shared values can be identified. "**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you**" is an example of a value that echoes across all the world's major religions and informs civic values in both East and West. "Great Spirit! Grant that I will not criticize my brother or sister until I have walked a mile in his or her moccasins" is a **Native American prayer** that resonates with the wisdom of communities across the globe.*

However, perhaps the most compelling example of a widely held value is service. The importance and nobility of dedicating one's time and energy to serving a community or cause greater than oneself shatters cultural, racial, religious, ideological, and geographic boundaries. The commitment to serve others unites individuals who would otherwise never connect, creating the type of bonds, understanding, and insight that can only come from working together side by side in pursuit of the greater good.

*This is the understanding of leadership that informed **Martin Luther King's** statement that "Anyone can be great, because everyone can serve." King understood that leadership is not exercised by just a few "great men" with formal authority; it can potentially be exercised by anyone, no matter how modest or elevated their station in life. That sentiment is echoed by **Robert Kennedy** in his assertion that "few will have the greatness to bend history; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."*

King and Kennedy place a widely shared value — service — at the heart of their understanding of leadership. Those who accumulate power and influence on their journey have enhanced their capacity to serve, but make no mistake: it is the commitment to service, not the access to power and influence, that is the essential ingredient of leadership. Imagine if we used this perspective to evaluate the effectiveness of each of us — from middle school students, to hedge fund CEOs, to elected representatives — as leaders in the 21st century.

*As global interdependence deepens in the decades ahead, the forces that compel humanity to work together to shape a shared destiny will only grow stronger. Given this reality, leaders must be guided by and appeal to a set of values that unite, not divide. Even in this age of partisanship and ideological conflict, we must remember that this quest for widely shared values is neither naïve nor quixotic. At **City Year**, we have striven to unite Democrats and Republicans, citizens and elected officials, the public, private, and non-profit sectors, and adults and youth of diverse races, cultures, and creeds around a shared mission of service.*

And we have succeeded in this effort by insisting that leadership is most definitely all about values.

*Dr. Max Klau is Director of Leadership Development at **City Year, Inc.***