THE THREE ESSENTIAL AND FOUNDATIONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE AND APPROPRIATE LEADERSHIP

By Karen Y. Wilson-Starks, Ph.D.   President and CEO, TRANSLEADERSHIP, INC.

Nearly all of the activities and characteristics of effective and appropriate leaders are subsumed under the three foundational qualities of character, vision, and relationship effectiveness. If a leader has these three qualities in good measure then true success is possible. If even one of the three is missing, then effective and appropriate leadership is not possible.

CHARACTER
Leaders bring themselves to their work. Character defines who they are, what they stand for, and what they will and will not do. The demands of leadership put leaders in positions that test their values and principles. Leaders are forced to ask tough questions like: how far will I go? What trade-offs am I willing to make? and Where do I draw the line? People of weak character often end up answering these questions in ways that reflect a lack of ethics, integrity, principles, or values. There are few if any limits or boundaries and hence the possibility for a whole host of corporate scandals and societal atrocities.

Leaders make decisions based on who they are inside. They engage in activities based on who they are inside. Without character a leader cannot "walk the talk" for the long-term. Though he or she may start well, eventually the true character emerges and the path of integrity is left behind for the path that gratifies self-serving desires. Hence, there are situations where leaders espouse the talk but fail miserably in the implementation of the walk.

Character also determines how a leader will engage in the work of leadership. Those of highly developed and noble character will handle problems with grace and tact, while those of baser character will resort to such tactics as manipulation, power plays, over-control, emotional outbursts, and tirades that tear down the one who is addressed. Character then is a compass that shows which way to go. If the compass is off-kilter, then so will be the steps of the leader.

When highly developed character is in place, leaders do not compartmentalize their lives so that they act one way at home and another way in the work place. When character is real, it permeates and influences the leader's entire life. When appropriate behavior appears in one segment of a leader's life, but not in other segments, then it is just a matter of time before that leader explodes unexpectedly like a time bomb.

In times past, definitions of leadership allowed for the possibility of people like Adolf Hitler being described as effective leaders. The world can no longer afford to define leadership in ways that include those like Hitler whose behavior is more aptly described as tyrannical, despotic, deluded and/or self-serving. Though such individuals may engage in some behaviors characteristic of leaders, the full package is not present and the

motivations are too mired by self-interest to warrant the definition of true leadership. True leadership has a value-based component that allows one to define it as both effective and appropriate by some generally accepted standard of right and wrong. True leadership has limits and boundaries. All behavior and all goals are not acceptable and the end does not justify the means.

VISION

Leaders also have responsibility for the success of the mission and for ensuring implementation of the strategic vision. To be responsible for the success of the mission, they have to have a vision of future possibilities and what could happen down the line. Visionary leaders provide a compelling direction and focus. They talk about the"what" and "why" of the purpose or "raison d'etre". This ability to see is characterized by insights about future trends, needs, opportunities, and barriers. The visionary leader sees the future, develops a strategy for getting to that future, and establishes a plan for articulating that vision to others.

The leader's ability to see is affected by the capacity to assess multiple aspects of the environment and to apply intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom to what is seen. Intelligence speaks of the capacity for strategic thinking and the ability to take in and analyze information in a dynamic way. Knowledge is about having information to apply to what is seen, and wisdom is figuring out the best way to use the knowledge and intelligence.

Effective vision paints a picture of the purpose or the desired end-state and ultimately leads to the goals that support and lead to the fulfillment of the purpose. If the vision is appropriate, then it leads to the greater good of the community and not just for a select few. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the most profound examples of a leader able to paint a visionary picture of the desired "end-state".

Decades later, his "I have a Dream" speech is still quoted and felt for the power of such words as, "…I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!...that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today". Dr. King effectively painted a visionary picture that still inspires the hope and actions of countless people today. In that same spirit, other visionary leaders draw a picture of the future and tie it to purpose and strategic direction.

RELATIONSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Relationship effectiveness is about working with employees, associates, team members, clients, suppliers, partners, communities, and others to get the job done. If character supplies the heart and vision the head, then relationship effectiveness supplies the feet. Without feet, the idea, plan, and good intentions go nowhere. Effective leaders know how to inspire others to participate in the vision. Relationship effectiveness is about "how" to get something done.

Inspiring others means creating environments and providing resources that allow people to do their best work. Inspiring others includes capitalizing on strengths, identifying and using talents, and shoring-up and strengthening areas needing development. The leader is also responsible for creating a culture that is hospitable to all team members. The more complex the challenge and the stiffer the competition, the more a team must be diverse. Diverse groups bring the value of divergent thoughts and ideas and new perspectives. These new perspectives sharpen vision and increase the group's ability to effectively compete in the marketplace. Thus, the leader is responsible for creating inclusive environments where all members are valued, respected and fully utilized.

Leaders who fail in the relationship effectiveness dimension are not comfortable with diversity of thoughts, ideas, and/or people. Consequently, they assemble teams of homogeneous people who cannot challenge them to reach new heights because those selected have been hired in the image of the leader. As a result, both leader and team members have the same blind spots.

Those who have not mastered the skills of relationship effectiveness also spend an inordinate amount of time criticizing their people, highlighting their faults, focusing on failures, and generally seeing the glass as half empty rather than half full. Such leaders are demoralizing and leave a lot of talent either uncultivated or lost to better opportunities.

At a time of such stiff competition in the marketplace, leaders cannot afford to lose high quality talent unnecessarily. Leaders must find ways to encourage, to open the dialogue, to collaborate, and to enhance performance. Keeping a positive focus on listening to, including, and developing others is essential. Those who are smarter or more talented, do not threaten leaders of noble character because noble leaders have developed a sense of quiet confidence and they accurately acknowledge their own strengths and development needs.

A modern day example of a leader who is described as demonstrating relationship effectiveness is Peter Drucker. In a New York Times article, several of Peter Drucker's advisees were interviewed. Drucker was described as being incredibly personal, having an extraordinary faith in people, and demonstrating the ability to build on people's strengths in such a way that their weaknesses became irrelevant.

THE BOTTOM LINE
The pyramid or three-legged stool of character, vision, and relationship effectiveness provides a sound structure for effective and appropriate leadership. If even one of the three is missing, effective and appropriate leadership is not possible. In addition, when character is the missing piece, then both vision and relationship effectiveness will also ultimately be compromised.

To some, Hitler may have been a good example of vision; however, his vision failed the test of benefiting the broader community. In addition, he failed miserably on character and ultimately on relationship effectiveness since coercion does not share the same space

as encouragement and inspiration. Thus by this accounting, Hitler cannot be seen as an effective or appropriate leader.

By contrast, Mother Teresa demonstrated a unique and effective blend of all three components of effective and appropriate leadership. She had a vision for improving the lot of the poorest and most down-trodden of earth's people. Her own character was such that she willingly sacrificed her own comforts and high standing in society to live with the poor. In addition, her relationship effectiveness motivated scores of others to take note of the plight of her target population and to also lend a helping hand.