



Leadership in Uncertain Times

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Abstract

We are undoubtedly in uncertain times, even in a time of crisis. The war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, uncertainty on the Balkans, a looming conflict in the South China Sea and economic stagnation in Europe all add up to what must be termed as a crisis. In such times leadership is paramount.

At the same time, Leadership remains the most studied and least understood topic in all the social sciences. In this contribution the author will not examine the track record of our current leaders. Simply look at the sub headings and decide for yourselves if your leader is up to the job or not.

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Analysis

No century has seen more leaders with CHARISMA than the 20th Century, and never have political leaders done greater damage than the four great charismatic leaders of this century, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler, and Mao. Charisma might help, it is however most overrated. The two military men who guided the Allies to victory in the Second World War, both Americans, were Eisenhower and Marshall. Both were highly disciplined, highly competent, and deadly dull. In post war Germany Adenauer integrated the country into Europe. He was a grey, colorless pedantic bureaucrat, and the perfect organization man – he was an accounting supervisor, an Oberbuchhalter. What he had instead of charisma was vision, deep religious faith, a sense of duty and a willingness to work very hard. Truman, the post war American President had even less charisma than Adenauer. Yet Truman saved post war Europe from Collapse into anarchy, communism and despair. He too had a deep sense of duty and a willingness to get and listen to the best advice. In short, charisma is most overrated when it comes to leadership.

Good leaders, especially in a time of crisis, are AUTHENTIC. They do not say anything they believe to be untrue, they do not feign enthusiasm, they do not feel and do not pretend to be something they are not. After all, you cannot be a leader all the time. No one can embody all good qualities all the time, and no-one can appeal to everyone in the same way. Authenticity requires the recognition of short comings and the determination to overcome the same.

Good leaders have COURAGE. and a willingness to make corrections. For a politician say „I was wrong“ takes real courage. When facts change, good leaders change their mind, and communicate the change effectively. Good leaders deal honestly and openly with mistakes and failures. If leaders don't do so, they loose credibility and trust with voters. Successful leaders value principles more than votes – and that takes courage.

Good leaders are good COMMUNICATORS. There are numerous examples of good communicators in leadership positions. Being a good communicator does not necessarily mean you are a good leader, but it does help providing you are not communicating untruths. The advent of 24 hour news programs and social media have made clear and honest communication ever more important. Tony Blair was a great communicator. He managed to make other peoples` words his own. He never looked miserable when speaking, unlike his successor Gordon Brown. Blair communicated his decision to join the US adventure in Iraq so well, that people believed him – at first. The greatest communicator in the late 20th century was probably Ronald Reagan. It is said that he could read out the telephone book and make it sound interesting.

Leadership is a TEAM SPORT. Given that more and more governments are coalition governments good leaders must insert themselves into existing teams. They have to act like a conductor of a world quality orchestra, bringing out the best in all members on the stage. Internal disputes need to be resolved within the team and then the solution, not the conflict, communicated clearly to the audience.

Good leaders are SELF-AWARE and know their limits and display GRACE. They know their limits and recognize that other peoples` ideas can be better than their own. HUMILITY is the single most attractive feature in a leader. Humility and grace are not the attributes one would use to describe Donald Trump.

Good leaders take RESPONSIBILITY. President Truman had a sign on his desk which read „the buck stops here“: Truman did not shy from taking difficult decisions. He led. When Argentina invaded the Falkland Isles Thatcher



insisted that the armed forces retake the islands, against the advice of her admirals and generals. She insisted and recaptured the islands. She too led and took the responsibility.

Good leaders are LISTENERS. Yes, they might read memos and documents, but mainly they listen to good advice and act on what they hear. Listening takes patience and time. Listening takes all the qualities listed in this piece, authenticity, courage, communication, team spirit, grace and self-awareness. Good leaders listen, think, debate, and decide.

In uncertain times people expect leadership and that leadership is lacking in Europe today. In the past we had leaders such as Jaques Delors who led the way to the Single European Market. We also had leaders such as Willy Brandt who opened the way to Eastern integration, Helmut Schmidt who stood up to the former Soviet Union and Helmut Kohl who seized the chance to unify Germany.

By and large our leaders in Europe today are more concerned by the next election than by the true needs and wishes of the nation. Add to that the fact that most European governments today are coalition governments than you have the situation that the biggest concern is the continuity of the coalition until the next election.

Good leaders must begin to manage this problem and need to work together with all parties in power and opposition. Good leaders in uncertain times can be certain that voters will recognize this and vote for them in the next election. Poor leaders will fall by the way.

Remarks: The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

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