

Leadership is Not a Game of Solitaire

By Ron Carlee

Leadership. It is not a game of solitaire. It is about interaction with others, influencing actions toward some objective – or not. Leadership can motivate and de-motivate. It can fill an organization with hope and direction or drain it, leaving an empty void of despair and confusion. It can be about empowerment and the infinite capacity of success to be shared, or it can create a zero-sum game of winners and losers that devolves ultimately into only losers.

So what do we, individually, do with leadership opportunities? We must be able to answer that question first in our hearts and then in our heads...and then into action. To do this well, we need to understand this thing called leadership and the responsibility that we have taken on ourselves.

There are three essential elements of leadership: traits, skills, and behaviors: what I refer to as self-awareness; ability; and action; what the Army has referred to a Be, Know, Do.

Knowing ourselves – **self-awareness** -- is the first critical part of leadership. Not everyone is comfortable with being out front and taking charge. It is scary, at times seems most presumptuous, and can result in intense feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and loneliness in even the most self-confident among us.

Why would anyone take on a leadership role? Often because we have more fear of the alternative – a leader other than ourselves. We believe that whatever our inadequacies, we can do better than someone else. We believe that we can make a difference.

At our worst, leaders demonstrate traits of a control, obsession with power, emotional immaturity, personal aggrandizement, domination of others, manipulation, coercion, and even megalomania.

At our best, we demonstrate service to others, stability, openness, commitment to success, optimism, hope, direction – and the greatest among these is service to others.

The second critical element is **ability**: possessing the knowledge and skills to effectively use those traits and talents that we possess. Continuous learning and growth are priorities to leaders.

And, what is learning? It is the process by which we develop a greater awareness of that which we do not know. Effective leaders are highly conscious of how much they do not know and make a life commitment to knowledge over ignorance.

No matter how good our intent or how righteous we are in our hearts, unless we possess the knowledge and skills to act on that which we believe, it is for naught. Both individually and, collectively as an organization, in today's world, we grow or we wither.

The third critical element is **action**. As Shakespeare wrote, "words to the heat of deeds, too cold breath gives;" ironically, the delusional Macbeth spoke these words on his way to kill King Duncan. Inaction in evil may be a virtue, but inaction in pursuit of good empowers evil. Shakespeare's great play of inaction starred the incapacitating indecision of Hamlet: to be or not to be... what a piece of work is man... woe is me. Hamlet was so afraid of doing the wrong thing that he did nothing. And the rest was silence.

In an effort to do good, leaders sometimes do the wrong thing. As Goethe said, "men err as long as they do strive." Novelist Tom Robbins wrote that "a mediocre failure is as insufferable as a mediocre success...so fail with wit, fail with grace, fail with style."

Failure and error happen, but they are not our goals. With the motivation of service to others, with hard work to develop knowledge and skills, leaders create the opportunity for success – and, more than a mediocre success.

Leadership is serious business; running a government is serious business...but it can and should be fun. Remember that we also founded this country and established our government to secure the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and **pursuit of happiness**. We do pretty good as public administrators on the first two of these and should not forget the happiness part.

Tom Robbins, quoted earlier, also said that "If civilization is ever going to be anything but a grandiose pratfall, anything more than a can of deodorizer in the [outhouse] of existence, then statesmen are going to have to concern themselves with magic and poetry." So here is a poem for you:

Magic

*Sandra's seen a leprechaun.
Eddie touch a troll,
Laurie danced with witches,
Charlie found some goblins' gold.
Donald heard a mermaid sing,
Susy spied an elf,
But all the magic I have known I've had to make myself.*
(Silverstein, Shel. 1974. Where the Sidewalk Ends.)

So let us be serious professionals, focused on high quality work, building our self awareness, developing our skills, and acting like leaders.

And, also let us give a few moments to magic and poetry... to the pursuit of happiness... to fun.