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3rd Place Essay: Leadership: A New Art

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Leadership: A New Art

By Matthew D. Reed

How do you define leadership? Like many of my peers, I have attended numerous leadership lectures, courses and seminars. Yet when asked to define leadership, each of these presumed leadership experts all give different responses. Their definitions are based on personal perspectives and experiences that they have whittled down to a simple scientific-like formula that they feel can be replicated by others. They peddle these formulas to the masses in catchy phrases and how-to guides that have appealed to the Millennials, who seem to need a simplified and quantifiable formula for everything. However, leadership is not a science. Leadership is more of an art and should be evaluated as such.

Like art, leadership is difficult to quantify. If you selected several pieces of artwork in a local museum, you would find that no two are alike. In fact, comparing the classical paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci with the works of Pablo Picasso would reveal few similarities, but each of these artists is well known and admired. The same is true with leadership. In comparing the leadership styles of Napoleon and Gandhi, for example, few similarities can be found, but each is known for being a great leader. Additionally, what worked in one situation and for one person may not bring the same results for others. A copy of a Rembrandt, no matter how exact, will never bring the same notoriety as the original. Each artist must develop his own style and seek to find his niche and area of expertise for the times in which he lives. The same is true of great leaders. Each successful leader is required to chart his own route, based on new and innovative ideas. A successful leader cannot rely on previously traveled pathways.

An additional similarity exists between artists and leaders, in that all of them have a goal they are trying to reach. While an artist's goal is to masterfully illustrate an idea through his work, a leader's goal is to inspire a group of people to accomplish a task. Over time, the goals and audience of the artist are likely to change. Therefore it might be necessary for the artist to adapt his techniques, styles, and mediums to accomplish the same purpose of delivering his message, and thus reaching his goal. In turn, a leader's goals and audience will change over time, making it necessary for the leader to adapt his style and methods in order to achieve positive results, thus making a simple scientific formula for successful leadership almost impossible.

Lastly, I feel that leadership is more closely tied to art than science because it cannot be accomplished by everyone. Despite one's earnest desires, there are few who actually become great leaders. No matter what amount of effort is given, some individuals are not destined to be leaders. The same is also true with art. No matter how hard I try, or how many art classes I take, I will never deliver a work of art like the Mona Lisa, which is a fact I must accept. God simply did not give me the talent. I believe that great leaders are born with the God-given gift of leadership. They can improve their skills through training, but there is something that they possess which cannot be taught. These qualities may be unique to their personalities or circumstances, but either way, they open windows of leadership opportunity which exist only for that individual. Any efforts to duplicate these qualities in hopes of achieving the same results would be futile, as no time, situation, or person is the same. They are not quantifiable through scientific formulas, but are innate abilities gifted from God.

According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary the definition of leadership is "a position as the leader of a group, organization, etc." In reality, however, leadership is so much more than that. Although everyone can benefit from studying and developing basic leadership qualities, just

as one studies the works of famous artists to benefit from their techniques, I believe that becoming a leader requires something more, something intangible. Like great works of art, great works of leadership can be found in many different forms and in all areas of life, every example unique. It cannot be described completely in a lecture, or in a course, or in a seminar. Leadership cannot be explained with a formula. But like a great work of art, we will know it when we see it.