



# Lack of leadership: our biggest problem

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The biggest problem we have in this country is not a lack of resources. Or infrastructure. Or jobs. Or access to coffee shops. Definitely not access to coffee shops.

And it's not a lack of money. Spending more will not solve our problems. Pouring more dollars into a dysfunctional enterprise will not make it any better; most of the time it only exacerbates the problem.

No, the biggest problem we have is a lack of leadership.

Sure, we have people in positions of leadership. We have managers, supervisors, principals, superintendents, directors, deans, department heads, presidents, vice presidents, CEOs, head honchos and assorted bosses in many flavors.

But very few of them are actually leaders. Don't believe me? Take a moment and look around.

Or peruse virtually any edition of the Daily News. Most companies, businesses, schools, governmental agencies and societal institutions in general seem to be in a state of perpetual crisis.

What we need are leaders who have a clue; i.e., leaders who care more about the people they are supposedly trying to serve than themselves. Show me a leader who is focused intently on their own agenda, career and livelihood and I'll show you a very poor leader.

The bigger the ego, the lower the ability to lead.

Leadership is not about telling people what to do and making sure they do it. Leadership is about getting people to want to do what needs to be done.

So how do we rectify the situation? We used to have great leaders. What happened?

The answer doesn't involve complex theories or fancy diagrams. And the last thing we need is a philosophical discussion on the nature of leadership. This is not rocket surgery.

From my vantage point, we've gotten away from the concept of "paying your dues." In the not-so-distant past, it took years to acquire the skills needed to be a successful leader. And I'm not talking about technical skills. Anyone can master those. I'm talking about relationship skills.

It takes a long time to truly understand people. What motivates them. How they relate to each other. And make no mistake, leadership – like most things in life – is all about relationships.

Period.

If you know how to deal with people, you have the potential to be an exceptional leader. But it takes decades to master the art of influencing others; to understand how to build support for an idea and how to navigate the challenges endemic to everything that involves human beings working together toward a common goal.

We have a generation or two of people who have ascended to leadership positions on the fast track. They didn't spend enough time in the trenches learning their craft and consequently they are now in

over their heads – and it shows. In fact, it’s painfully obvious to everyone – especially their followers.

If you haven’t held at least four lower-level positions, and if you haven’t spent at least four years in each of those positions before you were promoted, then you really aren’t qualified to lead a company, school, agency or anything else.

The most valuable quality any leader can possess is not an inspired vision of the future but a comprehensive understanding of the past, and more specifically the personalities, motivations, relationships that shaped that past. And it takes time to acquire that perspective.

So instead of having contempt for those with organizational memory, leaders need to embrace their wisdom and insights – and learn from them.

The bottom line: Want to solve our immense and complicated problems? Then put people in leadership positions who have slowly and conscientiously acquired the sagacity to address those problems.



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