

5 Myths about Leadership

By Greg Smith

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Leadership is probably one of the most talked about business concepts, but the least understood. Leadership is about getting things done and helping people reach their potential. My experiences as a consultant has shown me many organizations do a pitiful job helping people reach their potential. One reason for this is old-fashioned leadership techniques--out-dated leadership concepts or what I call, "leadership mythology."

A myth is something that is false, but believed to be true. As in many things in life, there are several myths surrounding the concept and practice of leadership. Unfortunately, these myths prevent qualified people from rising to the top. By listing these leadership myths, it is my hope to dispel many of the false beliefs.

Myth 1 - Leadership is a rare ability only given to a few.

Many people still think leaders are born not made. This can't be further from the truth. Most people have the potential to become good leaders. Leadership is not like a diet pill. Like most learned skills, it takes time, training, and lots of trial by error. The key ingredient making people good leaders is the ability to care about others. The second ingredient is a sense of purpose, vision or mission. A good leader charts a course and provides direction to those they lead.

Myth 2 - Leaders are charismatic.

Many leaders are charismatic, but closer scrutiny shows that most leaders are not. Some of the world's most famous leaders had warts--some sort of shortcoming or personality issue. In a leadership role, people skills are very important--more important than technical skills. However, the best leaders are those who work toward a goal. Your cause, your purpose and your mission in life will make you charismatic, not the other way around.

Myth 3 - The person with the title, most rank or the highest position is the leader.

True leadership is not based on position or rank. It is based on action, performance, ability, and effectiveness. We all relate to working for those people who were placed in leadership roles who did more to demoralize and destroy the business than anything else.

The best companies strive to develop and create as many leaders as possible. W.L. Gore & Associates, makers of Gore Tex and other products, have a unique approach to leadership. The practice of natural leadership "leadership by followship." They don't appoint people as leaders . . . they let the true leaders surface to the top. People naturally gravitate to those they want to follow, respect, and work with. There are no limiting job descriptions, job titles, and few rules and regulations. If a person comes up with a new idea, he or she puts a team together of people who have the desire and knowledge to make it work.

Myth 4 - Effective leadership is based on control, coercion, and manipulation.

Leadership is about the future, not the past. Joel Barker's has the best quote about leadership, "A leader is someone you would follow to a place you would not go to by yourself." Good leaders gain followers out of respect and their ability to cause people to work toward a particular goal or achieve a destination. People follow because they can relate to the vision or goal personalized by the leader. A good leader helps people become better than they are. A good leader creates a work environment that attracts, keeps and motivates its workforce.

Myth 5 - Good leaders have more education than other people.

Educational degrees may mean you have a good education, but it doesn't necessarily mean you are a good leader. When it comes to leadership, experience is the best teacher. The U.S. military has the best leadership development program in the world. In the military, you start out at the bottom. You are placed in leadership positions and closely evaluated. As your experience broadens, so does your responsibility. This practical experience is reinforced with weeks and months of formal training throughout the individual's career.

The secret of success is those years of experience on the front-line. This is where a person learns to manage those interactions, experiences, and conflicts. You learn how to balance the needs of the mission versus the needs of the individual. Those officers and non-commissioned officers who fail to advance must exit the military. The military model of leadership development may not be perfect, but remains unequalled by any other organization.

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With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

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