

# Three Reminders on Leadership

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Jim Collins distinguishes five levels of leadership:

Level one is about individual capabilities; level two is about being a great team player; level three is about managerial capabilities; level four is about effective leadership. And finally, there's level-five leadership. We found that leaders of great companies to be level fives, and companies that are good or mediocre are run by level-four leaders."<sup>1</sup>

Level-five leaders possess two characteristics: humility and will. Not, he says, the stereotypical qualities of the charismatic, level-four leader...at least, not the humility part. "The best leaders are humble" is an intriguing notion, and an attractive one. We'd like our leaders to be a lot humbler than they tend to be.

What if they're not? What advice might we provide?

Here's what I try to remind myself. I call up three associations with the job of university president: commander-in-chief, designer, leader. Then I replace each of them with something that may seem their opposite.

## ***Think Conductor, Not Commander***

Last year I came across a conductor's account of his job.

- "It is my responsibility to wake up the talent I know is there. How do I lead? I draw forth what is there. I don't tell them what to do. They are all professionals. I don't make it happen. I help it to happen if they want it to happen."
- "The first thing I do is let them play and listen to see what they bring."
- "I don't say a word of correction until I've danced with them for a while and kept my mouth shut."
- "It is my work to preserve the idealism and let it flow!"

I was struck by the similarities to leadership at a university—especially if we're talking about a jazz band instead of a symphony orchestra. "Waking up talent" may be too

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<sup>1</sup> "The Narrow Path to Leadership: What the Great Have over the Good," an interview with Jim Collins, *Optimize Magazine*, No. 34, August 2004.

strong a phrase. But “drawing forth what is there” and “preserving the idealism” are excellent reminders. So is “listen,” period.

As with the conductor, leadership at a university means listening, helping, encouraging talent, and reinforcing idealism; it is not telling people what to do. It is declaring and upholding the highest standards and loftiest goals. It is making sure we have the best people and connecting them with resources, including each other. Leaders identify big opportunities and threats, and help the university take them into account. Leaders emphasize islands of excellence and cut back areas of decline, if such areas exist.

This notion of leadership means helping everyone identify and communicate their passions and capabilities. It means understanding trends in flows of resources, including talented professors and students, research support, and philanthropy. It means analyzing what other universities are doing in response to those trends—and what, given the trends and the responses, our university can do distinctively well.

### ***Think Relationships, Not Designs***

On my desk I keep the last two pages of a letter Peter Drucker wrote to a friend of mine some fifteen years ago. Peter spent the first ten pages giving advice related to a specific institution my friend was creating. Those last two pages contained advice about my friend’s role as leader.

Peter talked about my friend being “the maker of policy and the designer.” He also mentioned quality control.

“But as I tried to stress, your first role—or perhaps one of the two first ones—is the personal one. It is the relationship with people, the development of mutual confidence, the identification of people, the creation of a community. This is something only you can do.”

Peter went on. “It is not something that can be measured or can be easily defined. But it is not only a key function. It is one only you can perform.”

### ***Think Great Follower, not Great Leader***

“Level fives,” Jim Collins says, “are characterized by a special brand of humility and, paradoxically, a ferocious will to do whatever needs to be done.”

Last year, Claremont convened a leadership conference on “followership.” This may seem a strange topic, but it drew experts from around the country. One take on their theme was that every leader needs followers, so if you’re a student of leadership you’d better also be a student of followership. Another take was the hypothesis I suggested in my opening remarks. Humility and will are the classic characteristics of great leaders and of great followers. Leadership and followership intersect at the highest levels of both. To be a better leader, must we also become a better follower?

What is a follower? One dictionary definition is “one who subscribes to the teachings or methods of another; an adherent; as, *a follower of Gandhi.*” At the conference I asked the audience to consider two crucial but often forgotten questions for aspiring leaders:

- Of whom or what should I be a follower?
- What does it mean, what does it require, for me to become a great follower?

I try to remind myself of these questions often.