

# *Four Essentials of Good Leadership*

© 2008 Howard A. Snyder

Every nation, every organization, and every church needs effective leaders. Because so much hinges on the quality and performance of leaders, “leadership” has emerged as a major area of study.

The key question is: What makes a good leader? What qualities are important for effective leadership in society generally, and in the church?

More basically: What is leadership? “Leadership is influence,” some say. But that’s only partly true. It would be equally true to say “Leadership is character,” because what a person *is* fundamentally shapes what he or she does. People of strong character and moral integrity do have influence and sometimes often leaders, perhaps unintentionally.

But good leadership is more complex than this. It can’t be reduced to just one quality or dynamic.

From a Christian standpoint, effective leadership is a combination of four basic ingredients: *Character, ability, vision, and experience.*

## **Character**

*Character* denotes a person’s inner being; their fundamental moral nature. Character is shaped largely by family influences and by the choices a person makes throughout life. Good character results from good choices; bad character from choices that are bad and ultimately self-destructive. Good character includes the virtues of integrity, patience, humility, moderation, self-control, and determination.

Biblically speaking, good character means embodying moral wisdom. The book of Proverbs, especially, teaches character formation. For the Christian, good character is having the mind of Jesus Christ (who is “the wisdom of God”) and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit.

The greatest leaders are those with upright moral character—people who recognize their own character flaws but refuse to yield to them, controlling themselves so they focus their energy and creativity on worthy goals.

## **Vision**

*Vision* is the ability to see new possibilities. It includes both perceptions of how things can change and irreplaceable hope and optimism that provides the energy for the vision.

Many leaders in history have had vision—but not had the required ability or skills to discern the steps needed to turn vision into reality. This seemed to be true of Jimmy Carter when he was President of the United States. Ironically, he has been a much more effective visionary leader as a former President!

Other leaders have vision and know how to turn it into reality, but the vision is warped or even diabolical. Hitler was the greatest and worst, though certainly not the only, example in the twentieth century.

Jesus was a man of vision, and his vision was the kingdom of God. This should be the Christian's vision, as well. It is our constant prayer—that God's kingdom may come; that his will may be done on earth as in heaven. Effective Christian leaders are those who know how to align their specific, present strategic vision with the trajectory of the kingdom of God, rather than veering off in another direction—while also recognizing that the kingdom of God in its fullness is God's work, not something they can bring about through their own efforts or cleverness.

### **Experience**

*Experience* is also important in good leadership. Through experience leaders learn how to increase their effectiveness. An inexperienced leader of vision and good character can be effective, but is sure to make mistakes. Though no substitute for vision and character, experience is a golden asset. In most cases an experienced leader will be more effective than an inexperienced one.

In the Old Testament we see how God worked to prepare leaders like Moses, David, Esther, Deborah, and Joseph through a series of difficult experiences.

The New Testament also gives examples, including Jesus' training of the Twelve. Paul advises that prospective deacons "must first be tested" before being given a diaconal responsibilities (1 Tim. 3:8-10 NIV). Hebrews 5:8 tells us that Jesus himself "learned obedience from what he suffered" (NIV). The experience of suffering helps shape character and increases a leader's compassion, provided one is open to its lessons.

### **Ability**

*Ability*—the requisite gifts and talents—is sometimes seen as the most important quality in leaders, but is really secondary to character. Yet basic capability is fundamentally important. Ability includes both native intelligence and the skills to inspire people and to help them undertake the practical tasks necessary to translate vision into reality. A leader's ability can be increased through education, including how to reason clearly (logic) and the acquisition of practical skills—say in organizational dynamics or in appropriate technology.

Effective leaders have the intelligence, the insight, and the skills to motivate people and get them working together to achieve worthy goals. A person who combines good character, basic ability, experience, and vision is sure to be an effective leader. This seems to be true universally, in any culture.

### **Christian Leaders**

Christian leadership is unique compared with all other kinds for four reasons: It is centered in the perfect model, Jesus Christ; it has the largest possible vision, the kingdom of God; it relies upon the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit; and it works within the

context of community, the body of Christ on earth.

For the church, Jesus is the model. From a Christian standpoint, leadership is more than the effective managing of organizations or people. In fact, from a biblical standpoint the issue is not *leadership* as an abstract quality, but rather *persons* who exhibit the character and “mind” of Jesus Christ. The Bible is not concerned with “leadership” as such, or as a set of theories and principles. It is fundamentally concerned with being authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, and authentically being the body of Christ.

Effective Christian leadership is the combining, through the grace of God, of the qualities of character, vision, experience, and ability, all in the spirit of Jesus, within community, with a vision for the kingdom of God.

Many other factors and dynamics may be important for leadership in church and society. But these four are essential.

September 2008