How to Become a Great Leader

By Deepak Chopra

Leadership is a hot topic and will always be one. We seem to linger in a perpetual leadership vacuum. Today's Presidents and CEOs, generals and coaches, don't stand in comparison with the great leaders of the past - or so we are told - and in times of crisis, people cry out for someone who can show them a way to escape the looming threat. There's a general myth that leaders are born rather than made, that somehow Nature produces a peculiar species of human being who is bigger, more powerful, smarter, braver, and more charismatic than the rest.

But waiting for such a rare bird is futile, for there are many crises that never find the natural born leader it needs. The real challenge in leadership is to find a way to build leaders. The main way that business schools and government departments attempt this is by studying the past. Learning from history has its advantages, naturally. There are lessons to be learned about how World War II was won, why the Chicago Bulls were such a successful basketball team, and why Wall St. banks, led by greed and short-sightedness, created the financial collapse of 2008.

But today's crises never completely mirror yesterday's, and it would be better in the first place to build leaders who can prevent crises before they arise. In my view, a great leader is inspiring, uplifting, a uniter of differences, and someone who brings out the best in human aspirations. I named this model "the soul of leadership" and set out to see if leaders with a soul could be trained.

Knowing that business, politics, and the military are not spiritual enterprises, I didn't formulate the training along "soft" or idealistic lines. Instead, I used a "hard" criterion: what groups actually need. If you aspire to be a great leader, the first requirement is that you look and listen, so that you can find out the true needs that a situation demands to be fulfilled. There are seven such needs:

1. Safety, security

Situations of threat and instability. People feel insecure. Discontent is in the air. You can see nervous faces, feel the prevailing anxiety. Who is going to make the situation feel safer?

2. Achievement, success

Situations of unrealized *achievement*. People feel unsuccessful. They want to be more productive, but there's not enough fire or passion. Who is going to step up and provide the motivation so sorely needed?

3. Cooperation

Situations that are *incoherent and fragmented*. There's no team spirit. The group disintegrates into bickering and petty wrangling. Meetings go on forever but reach no conclusion. Who's going to be the glue that brings coherence to the situation?

4. Nurturing, belonging

Situations mired in *bad feeling and apathy*. Everyone is going through the motions, doing what they need to do but inside feeling totally disengaged. The atmosphere is stale and routine. There's no personal support or trust. Who's going to bring heart to the situation and make others feel that they belong?

5. Creativity, progress

Situations dominated by *old solutions and stale ideas*. People feel stymied. The atmosphere has no creativity; it feels like yesterday's news. Everyone agrees that something new is needed, but all that emerges are small variations on the status quo. Who's going to bring the spark of creativity to the situation?

6. Moral values

Situations that are *spiritually empty and corrupt*. The weak feel hopeless, the strong are cynically taking advantage. People talk about righting wrongs and bringing back the right values, but no one knows where to start. The future feels like wishful thinking; the present is oppressive and suffocating. Who will bring hope and a renewed sense of innocence?

7. Spiritual fulfillment

Situations that symbolize *the human condition*. People are asking the big questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Many are seeking for God. There is talk of a higher reality, yet faith is lacking. Who can bring the light and demonstrate that holiness is a living reality?

Having looked and listened, you will know the situation you are in and the need that is crying out to be fulfilled. As you can see, the "hard" criterion that shaped this model of leadership eventually leads to moral values and spirituality, because in reality those aren't "soft" needs. Every human being has a yearning for them. But unless the basic needs are fulfilled, appealing to a group's ideals is usually futile.

In the next few posts I'll detail how each need arises and how you as a leader can bring about change in other people's lives. The most common cause of leadership failure is ego, which means that someone is looking out for number one rather than the group. Ego is a legitimate basis for action - it's the second need above safety and security. We all want the good things in life; our instinct is to provide for "I, me, and mine." But the collapse of Wall St. and many disastrous wars have resulted when leaders get stuck on ego. You can be a great leader, with all the rewards this carries, while still serving the needs of the whole group. In essence, that's what the soul of leadership is all about.