



The Longing for Good Leaders

We want good leaders. In fact, we crave good leaders. We're hungry for good, worthy, followable leaders in every part of our lives.

You can see it in our very public cynicism about and hanging-out-to-dry of all the leaders who fall short of our expectations. You can hear it in our hopeful, almost mythic, recounting of tales of those leaders we think/feel/believe just might be great.

We have a deeply wired-in need for leaders who will guide us well and safely; who care more about the success of the enterprise than about their own comfort; who call out our best and take full advantage of who we are. And we long to be that kind of leader as well—to evoke that *I'm with you—let's go!* response from those who work with and for us.

I've come to believe that this longing for good leaders is an ancient, primal group survival mechanism. Until recently, if you chose badly in terms of who you decided to follow, you and your family and friends were likely to die: to starve to death, be overrun by invaders, fall into violent lawlessness. And although the stakes aren't as high these days (generally), our wiring hasn't really changed.

This book offers a window into what those core timeless attributes are, why they are so essential to us, and, perhaps most important, how to develop these attributes in yourself. How to become the leader people will follow, so that together you can build strong teams and companies that

will survive and thrive through the modern business version of famine and invasions.

So how did I crack the code?

In the mid-1990s, I was balancing two very important things (this may resonate for many of you): my family and my business. I had young children, and the consulting firm I had founded in 1990 was starting to take off. I spent most days observing and working with leaders in client companies and most evenings reading bedtime stories.

I started to notice something very interesting in my client organizations. Often the person who was the appointed leader was not the person others looked to for direction and reassurance. In one meeting this was so blatantly the case that I wondered that others didn't notice; the CEO would say something, and most of the folks attending the meeting would quickly glance at the CFO to note his reaction. They clearly, though perhaps unconsciously, were treating the CFO as their actual leader, even though the CEO was the official leader.

What is it, I started to wonder, that makes someone willing to consider one person his or her leader but not another?

At the same time, as I was reading story after story to my kids, I began to notice that many of the tales were about someone overcoming adversity to become a worthy leader. In fact, the more I read, the more I noticed a pattern: the poor lad (almost always a lad versus a lass, but we'll overlook that for the moment), generally the youngest and least impressive of three brothers, makes his way through a very specific and predictable series of trials. And in the process, he develops or reveals a core set of personal attributes that allow him to save the princess and become the wise and just ruler by the end of the tale.

Many of the stories my daughter and son loved best were from a series of books published in the early twentieth century that included fairy stories and folktales from all over the world. As I read them, I noticed that this pattern of attributes essential to becoming a leader was remarkably consistent across time and culture. It seemed to me that I had stumbled on an archetype. So as I read and continued to look for

the common elements, I began to think about why this should be so—why human beings would have a built-in archetype for the qualities to look for in a leader.

It occurred to me that until a few hundred years ago, the goal of most collections of people (villages, tribes, ethnic or religious groups) was much more clearly defined and compelling than those of today's organizations. Groups of human beings came together to survive, literally, against human enemies and the challenges of nature. The job of the leader was to help the people stay alive. Once that was assured, it was also hoped that he or she would make decisions that allowed life to be reasonably pleasant, that is, free enough from the fear of capture or death (or both) to allow the creation of some sort of family and spiritual life. The tribe would only put its fate in the hands of a chieftain who had proven his worth and fitness to lead; the stakes were too high to trust someone ill equipped to handle the tasks of leadership. Most often in prefeudal cultures, leadership was not hereditary; leaders were chosen on the basis of demonstrated prowess in hunting, in council, in war.

Today most of us are far safer from the threat of starvation or war than were our ancestors. But thousands of years of conditioning don't evaporate within a few hundred years. Gun control, antibiotics, credit cards, and peace accords between major nations don't take away our deeply felt need for worthy chieftains.

So when someone who is put in the leader seat doesn't demonstrate the leadership qualities for which human beings have a kind of built-in radar, that person is unlikely to be effective as a leader. If the people are tentative in their acceptance of the leader, if that person doesn't satisfy their "leader hunger," they are less likely to offer their commitment and support, and it's more difficult for that person to guide the organization to success.

As I thought about these things, I continued to observe my clients and their interactions with one another. Time and again, I watched as people chose their real leaders quietly, without a conscious or verbalized selection process. This is not to say that the process was invisible

or arbitrary. It was relatively easy to observe once I started noticing it, and there was definitely a pattern to it. As I began to pull out the key attributes of leadership from the folktales I was reading, I noticed over and over that people seemed willing to fully accept someone as their leader, and commit to being a true member of that person's team, only when he or she demonstrated these attributes.

Naming the Elements

I began to get excited: I felt if I could clarify these archetypal elements and translate them into today's organizational reality, I would have a tool that could be dramatically helpful to people wanting to become more effective leaders: *wanting to become a leader that others would follow*.

After much observation and reflection, I felt I had come to a clear way to describe what I was reading about and understanding. I decided to test out the model with a real-life leader, someone who was not only the designated leader but to whom others clearly looked as the person who "felt like" the leader as well. I shared with him what I've just told you, and then I explained the six leadership attributes that had emerged in my research as the key components of the leadership archetype. He listened carefully and immediately began to use the model. His first response was, "So, Eileen [one of his senior team members] has the first three elements, but I'm not sure about the last three. I bet that's what's getting in her way. And we definitely have to work on the first one with Larry. And I think I'm pretty good on all of them except the third. How would I work on that?"

I was excited. The fact that he immediately, without question or confusion, began to apply the attributes to real leaders in his organization, and to himself, argued to me that I had indeed stumbled onto something primal, that I had identified those attributes that resonate in our "looking-for-leaders DNA."

Fast-Forward

Now it's almost fifteen years later. My children are adults, soon to be reading bedtime stories to their own children. My colleagues and I at Proteus International now use this "leading" model to help people at every level in organizations think and behave as leaders. We've found that learning these six attributes gives people a useful, practical framework for self-reflection and growth. And it helps them build more productive teams and organizations by becoming the leader who provides a strong, safe point around which people's hopes and efforts can coalesce. We've taught the model to young men and women in their first "leader" jobs, and we've used it to coach CEOs. It makes immediate logical and intuitive sense to most people, and it seems to be almost universally helpful as a tool for their leadership growth.

I hope this book will provide you with a simple, immediately applicable approach to looking at yourself as a leader with fresh eyes and that it will then guide you in deciding what you need to do to become the sort of leader who is truly given the chance to lead. I'll approach our time together as I would if I were coaching you one-on-one: I'll share stories and examples, provide a framework for thinking, encourage you to self-assess, and offer self-directed activities to help you discover and strengthen each of these six attributes in yourself. This model can help you understand what it takes to be a leader others will gladly follow and then offers you guidance to develop those characteristics in yourself.

If you want to lead, I'm offering you a set of tools to be the kind of leader people long for—one who can partner with and guide them past all of the modern trolls and monsters you'll encounter, so that you can find your own twenty-first-century happy endings.

On to the journey!

