

ESD.801: Leadership Development

Homework Assignment 4: Personal Leadership Plan

MIT Student



This class has been an excellent opportunity to analyze my own personal view of leadership now, think about the leadership I have demonstrate, and plan to improve my leadership performance in the future.

After reflecting on these themes, I believe that the three most important qualities of a leader are:

- Ethics
- Vision
- Tenacity

Each of these qualities has played an important role in leadership in my life, and I believe many of the most admirable leaders from history demonstrate these qualities.

Ethics

A true leader must first and foremost hold true to a set of personal values and morals throughout his endeavors. Successful leaders often gain power as their accomplishments grow, and this power can lead to corruption. An ethical leader will not success lead them astray of their original values. In fact, the best leader will use ethics to further his success.

An example from recent history of an ethical leader is Roy Vagelos and his work at the pharmaceutical company Merck. Generally, one thinks of the pharmaceutical industry as largely profit-driven. Certainly the development of new drugs imposes large costs, and pharmaceutical companies need to make large amounts of revenue on their drugs in order to compensate for this.

However, research scientists at Merck realized in the 1970s that a drug they had developed to treat parasites in animals could also be used to treat river blindness, a very damaging disease that was widespread in Africa. Merck carried out clinical trials in Africa and soon realized there would be no

market for the drug. However, not only did Merck distribute the drug for free, they also set up a distribution system. CEO Roy Vagelos was instrumental in convincing Merck to do this. Not only did he follow his personal convictions; he believed that losing money on this particular drug would lead to future prosperity for his company:

“Some argue that corporations should not be in the business of making donations, contending that their first obligation is to reward stockholders with higher dividends and not squander company resources on gifts. I disagree. Our policy on Mectizan and other gifts made Merck a place where people were proud and excited to work because they wanted to make lives better around the world. It helped us recruit the best people and build company morale. It was consistent with Merck’s fundamental corporate philosophy of doing well by doing good. It served the global society Merck serves. It also served Merck’s stockholders because corporate social generosity is often followed by higher profits as the corporation becomes a better, more attractive workplace for the best talent.”¹

I hope to follow this example in my own career. Having very little real-world experience to date, I have not yet found myself in a position where the benefit of my company or my job may have been at odds with my values. However, now working as a graduate research assistant at the MIT Energy Initiative, I am acutely aware of the relationship between academic research and corporate sponsorship. During my first semester here, my research was primarily sponsored by the Gas Technology Institute (GTI), an organization with a clear pro-gas agenda. While it would have been easy to rely entirely on data collection and analysis that had already been performed by GTI, I made sure to go out of my way to perform and check this analysis on my own so that my research would yield unbiased results despite sponsorship of an organization with a clear agenda. Likewise, my thesis work will be sponsored by BP, and I plan to make sure that however my research evolves, it does so in a way that maintains its integrity and neutrality despite any goals of BP.

Vision

Often times what sets a leader apart from his peers is his vision. The best leaders are those who change the world for the better in some way, and often the biggest challenge in doing this is figuring out how to change the world.

I think a great current example of real-world leadership is demonstrated by Greg Mortensen of *Three Cups of Tea* fame. Mr. Mortensen has developed a career in which he builds schools to educate children—especially girls—in rural communities in Pakistan. His vision for creating peace in a country often plagued by violence is so successful because it is simple, cheap, sustainable, and effective. Educating women changes communities forever. As Greg himself says:

"Once you educate the boys, they tend to leave the villages and go search for work in the cities, but the girls stay home, become leaders in the community, and pass on what they’ve learned. If

¹ Geoffrey Heal. Chapter 5, “Pharmaceuticals and Corporate Responsibility”. *When Principles Pay: Corporate Social Responsibility and the Bottom Line*.

you really want to change a culture, to empower women, improve basic hygiene and health care, and fight high rates of infant mortality, the answer is to educate girls."²

I feel that one of my biggest shortcomings in my own personal leadership is a lack of vision. I found Greg Mortensen's book incredibly inspiring, and I too would like to empower communities in the developing world. However, I don't yet have an idea for how to do so. I plan to learn more and eventually develop my own idea in two ways. First of all, one of the greatest opportunities at MIT is the chance to connect and network with so many intelligent, driven, and passionate individuals, many of whom do have a vision for how to change the world. I hope to meet and learn from as many of these people as possible. I also think it is extremely important to travel to the developing world and witness the problems faced by communities first hand in order to fully understand the root of these challenges. MIT is also an excellent place to be able to do this; in fact, I will take my first trip to the developing world in January with a three-week fellowship with an MIT-founded non-profit to implement a water treatment system in a rural village near Tamale, Ghana.

Tenacity

Often times in leadership it is not genius or opportunity that leads to great achievement but the simple ability to work hard and never give up. When facing a particularly challenging problem, success is rarely achieved on the first attempt. The best leaders maintain their confidence and keep trying repeatedly until they do succeed.

An excellent example of this is one we discussed in class of Thomas Edison. His idea to invent the light bulb was seemingly far-fetched. He had to go through countless attempts and spent long hours continuously working, trying different metals in different shapes and sizes before he was finally successful. It was his relentless drive that gained him success in the end.³

In my own life, I think that tenacity has been one of my main drivers for success. For example, I played the violin growing up but was often behind many of my peers as I had started play relatively late in my childhood. This put me at a disadvantage when auditioning for various orchestras and honors. I often failed these auditions miserably, but practiced very hard and in the end had much success. At the end of the day, success as a musician is largely not determined by innate skill but rather by hard work. These experiences in my youth have taught me much about tenacity and success, and I know I will keep applying them in my future.

² Greg Mortensen. *Three Cups of Tea*. 2006.

³ Harold Evans. "The Spark of Genius". *America's Greatest Inventor*. 2004.

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