

A leader needs more than just ambition

By Ben Ochs

Tradition loves a go-getter. Someone who knows what he wants and goes after it. Someone with energy, confidence and focus. What a coup, to find a person we can turn loose on a challenge and know he will get results. Ambition!

But is ambition all it takes to be a great leader? Though it is an essential element of success and is ubiquitous among effective leaders, when it's taken to an extreme, ambition in the absence of other characteristics can be a real obstacle. It must be balanced with reassurances to others that they won't be used as a rung in some hard-charger's ladder: tested for the components he needs, such as strength, reliability, stability, being in the right place at the right time, willingness to be used, a passive attitude . . . then quickly forgotten after he steps on us, raises his profile and moves on.

We want to know that we have value. Knowing that what we contribute is important and valued is our single greatest motivator.

Human nature is very consistent. When we work with someone who has convinced herself that she is the best, that she knows everything, can't make a mistake or has little use for our perspectives, we find ways, actively or passively, to let her prove it. Though we may stop short of intentionally hurting her, our motivation to help her reach greater heights is lost. Perhaps more important, when she struggles, we quietly revel in her misfortune. "She deserves every bit of it," we say, or, "Let's see her dig her way out of this one." We resent being treated as mindless tools who are valuable only to the degree that we remain available and in good repair to be used on demand.

What we find in great leaders is a combination of ambition and friendliness. Some call it courage and compassion, or directness and diplomacy. Their intentions are clear and they make no apologies for having grand goals and aggressive timelines, but they remain approachable and give us the impression that we are invited along. They aren't going to compromise their goals or plans, so we cannot expect to be coddled. But if we are willing to honor our own commitments, they will celebrate our successes.

Great leaders are the first to acknowledge their shortcomings. They know what they don't know and are the first to place credit where credit is due. If you broach a subject about which you know a fair amount, they will demonstrate a genuine interest by asking questions and sharing perspectives. What they avoid is a compulsion to convince you that they already know it and to a greater degree than you -- even when they do.

Grace and strength combine in great leaders. They are career builders and are an asset to anyone who deserves them. What great leaders realize is that they, too, were once conscientious, hard-working, selfless, committed employees who were the beneficiaries of someone who noticed and took a risk on them.

It takes a concerted effort and a fair amount of energy to focus on people when you have made significant gains. People have an enormous capacity to take things for granted upon receiving recognition or reward. We quickly forget what it is like to be even one stratum below where we are.

Ambition is the one characteristic that gives us the juice to pursue our dreams while, at the same time, blinding us to the importance of being grounded. Humility and the acceptance of our limitations help us appreciate the efforts and talents of those around us and inspires them to excel for us.

Tradition loves a go-getter. We love to get near her. We will show maniacal loyalty when she turns to us and makes a commitment to demonstrating her appreciation and respect.

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