

LIE #9 - YOU ARE NOT A LEADER IF NO ONE FOLLOWS YOU

I have read a ton of books and articles about leadership, and if you are reading this article, then you probably have as well. I am always looking to find that new insight or better way of thinking about leadership, and if I read enough, then maybe I will find out what makes that “perfect” leader. But the sad truth is that most leadership books are overlooking fundamental truths about leadership.

In the May 2021 Human Capital article, we started to explore the truth about great leadership, specifically that there is no recipe for great leaders. If you were to think back on some of the best leaders you ever knew, you might find some shared traits, but more often than not you would also find some leaders that run counter to those traits. The reality is that great leadership is about leveraging unique strengths, not checking the boxes on a set of desired traits or skills.

In this month’s article, we will continue our debunking of the concept of “great” leadership by exploring a fundamental truth that most leadership books ignore; leadership is not about the leader, it’s about the followers. A person can have all the “ideal” traits, but if no one follows them, then they aren’t a leader. If we truly want to improve our ability to lead people, then we need to stop viewing leadership through the lens of the leader, and instead view leadership through the lens of the follower.

The Nine Lies We All Believed

I was reminded of the criticality of defining a leader through the lens of their followers by the book, *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader’s Guide to the Real World*, by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall. *Nine Lies* uses research, data, and engaging stories to identify and dismantle some of the most common beliefs we hold about work and replace them with simpler truths. My personal belief is that every senior leader and HR manager needs to read *Nine Lies*.

I can personally attest that some of my core beliefs about leadership and high performance were completely shook up. For example, earlier in my career I was a huge advocate for identifying employees with “High Potential.” But after reading *Nine Lies*, I realized “potential” is more situational than we like to admit, and in the right circumstances everyone has potential. That is why I have been writing this series of articles on the *Nine Lies*. My hope is that these articles can open your eyes to the need to think about leadership and talent differently, and I also hope you buy the book.

What Makes a Great Leader?

Earlier in my career, I worked very hard to define great leadership. In each stop of my career, I would wind up working on some project to define and build up the critical leadership qualities needed in that company. I would always work with leaders in the companies to define out the qualities they saw as important in their success and in the success of others. It should be no surprise that a pretty standard list of generic “leadership” traits would emerge: ethical, inspirational, caring for others, creating a winning strategy, great communicator, coalition builder, etc.

For the longest time, I never really questioned these “ideal” leadership traits. Each one made sense. I mean, everyone would want to work for a leader that shows empathy, is inspiring, and works well with others. Just as everyone would want to avoid a leader who is unethical, a horrible communicator, and a horrible decision maker. But the reality is that all leaders have flaws. Even some of the most revered leaders in history have significant gaps in these “ideal” leadership traits.

- Creating winning strategy - Winston Churchill had so many disastrous policies in the 20s and 30s that he was exiled from the government.
- Great communicator - King George the IV of Great Britain was revered for his leadership of GB throughout WW2, but as The King’s Speech shows, he could barely speak in public.
- Coalition Builder - The prominent suffragist leader, Susan B. Anthony, created so many enemies within the other women’s suffrage leaders that it created a split in the movement for 20 years.

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- Ethical - Steve Jobs would buy a new car every six months just so he could avoid registering the car, so as to be able to park in handicap spots whenever he wanted to.
- Caring for direct reports - General George Patton physically assaulted his troops suffering from PTSD
- Authenticity - John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt both hid their serious illnesses from the public.

Followers Make Leaders

Once we stop thinking about leaders in terms of some checklist of traits and abilities, we can start thinking about leaders through the lens of what really defines them: their followers. It doesn't matter what skills you have or what traits you possess. If no one follows you, then you aren't a leader. You're just someone with a title.

Defining leadership through the lens of followers, starts by understanding what followers want. While there are many different thoughts on what followers want, Buckingham's and Goodall's research highlights that most followers want two things: *"they want to feel a part of something bigger than themselves, and they want to feel their leader knows and values them as a unique individual."*

The beauty of this definition of followership is that it provides a clear and measurable desired outcome for leaders (see March's Human Capital article on Lie #1). And by focusing more on the outcomes of good leadership (instead of the methods), we open ourselves up to the great leaders who don't check all the traditional boxes. We stop focusing on how each leader needs to fill a skill gap, and instead focus on how a leader can use her individual strengths to deliver the desired outcomes for their team.

Rethinking How We Hire, Measure, and Manage Our Leaders

This new approach to leadership is not something that can be turned on overnight. It will require us to rethink a lot of our Leadership and HR processes. For example:

- **Hiring/Promotions** - Instead of trying to identify the "right" leadership capabilities, interviews and promotion processes should focus on concrete examples of when the potential leader delivered the desired outcomes.
- **Performance Management** - Measuring performance shouldn't be limited to achieving your role specific metric or goals. For a leader, measuring their performance should also be tied to the two success outcomes of their teams. I mean, can they really be a success if they've achieved their goals, but their team hates them?
- **Development** - Leadership development needs to stop being about addressing our gaps in leadership skills. Instead, we should recognize that different leaders have different ways to deliver their leadership outcomes. Their development as leaders should focus on them building their unique way of achieving those outcomes, and not trying to replicate some ideal image of a leader.
- **Talent Management** - When it comes to identifying the high talent leaders in our organizations, we need to stop looking at the leaders that look great on paper but fail to deliver the great leadership outcomes for their teams.

For some reason, leadership is one of the few things in business that we focus more on the "right way" of doing things and less on the outcomes. We don't think bankrupt companies are successful just because they had a great marketing plan. Nor do we think that a project that failed to hit its deliverables is a success just because it followed a project management methodology.

Success in business is defined by outcomes. Leadership should be no different.

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