

Leadership is for passionate people

Love is one of the most important qualities required of a great leader.

A reader called me last week to ask that I write a column about the "L" word. I asked if that meant liberalism? Lipinski the skater? Lewinsky the intern?

"No," she explained, "I mean *leadership*. It's one of the most discussed and least understood topics in the world."

It is also one of the most important topics. Organizations desperately seek better leadership. They want leaders who are committed to excellence, are unafraid of change, and have the resilience to adapt their organizations to the dramatic changes affecting the economy and society. And they need leaders of pristine integrity committed to trustworthiness and high moral standards.

The current social environment requires a new type of organizational leadership. The old-style view was individualistic and hierarchical. It said "I'm the boss and I have all the answers; I don't make mistakes, and no one may question my authority."

Today we live in a much more complex society where individual rights, democratic processes and shared governance are paramount.

As a result, leaders can no longer view their role as that of a cowboy roping a steer and dragging the organization where they want it to go. Modern leadership is inspirational and conversational. It requires getting everyone involved and excited about the future by creating an atmosphere of ferment, innovation and freedom.

The best leaders, it seems to me, are those



who inspire people to perform rather than simply order them to do so. As Dwight Eisenhower once said, modern leadership is "persuasion and conciliation and education and patience." He then put a piece of a string on a table and said, "Pull it, and it will follow anywhere you wish. Push it, and it will go nowhere at all."

There are many key attributes of great leaders, but an indispensable quality is love. Leaders need to have a passionate devotion to their organization and its future.

When I address Furman freshmen each fall, I tell them that one of the most important things they will do is to discover what they love and surrender themselves fully to it.

The great leader need not have a beautiful face, a resonant voice, a brawny physique or an elegant facility with words. Such charisma may be desirable, but it is not required. Leaders succeed to the extent that they have an abiding commitment to what they are doing and the organization they are serving. "Find a leader who loves his business," explains Warren Buffet, the investment genius, and the organization will have a much better chance of success.

Such leaders project an infectious "can-do" spirit. There is an old Texas saying that "you

can't light a fire with a wet match." The world is moved by people who are enthusiastic. They can lift organizations and help people exceed their own expectations. Impassioned leadership helps common people do uncommon things.

Inertia is the rust corroding organizational effectiveness. Too many organizations follow the Paul Masson theory of leadership: "We will deal with no problem before its time." Loving leaders root out such complacency.

In this sense leadership is for lovers, for people who love their country, their alma mater, their organization, their work. The best leaders are inspiring because they are themselves inspired by a higher purpose, devoted to a transcendent cause, and passionate in their attachments. People want to follow leaders who are exemplary, who insist upon quality, who help us define and achieve ambitious goals.

Leaders who love what they are doing display a contagious self-confidence, an unwarranted optimism and incurable idealism that animates others to undertake demanding tasks. In short, compelling leaders empower and liberate. They create an environment in which people are encouraged to be creative leaders themselves, to bond together as teams or groups or volunteers, to solve problems or meet challenges too big for any individual.

So, yes, leadership is for lovers — for people with a disciplined passion informed by a desire to build and serve. Schools can teach it, books can describe it and organizations can foster it. But only as individuals can we embrace and embody it. We do not so much need great leaders as we need leaders who can arouse the greatness in us. As the Gospel of Mark declares, "Whoever of you shall be the chiefest, shall be servant of all."

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