

The Continuing Crisis in Leadership

by Jon Craighead

There is little disagreement that, in the eyes of the public, we have a leadership problem today. The Institute for Corporate Productivity conducts an annual survey of North American companies in which executives are asked to rank 120 different issues facing businesses. Leadership is continually ranked highest. In fact, leadership has landed in the number one spot every year since 1997. You cannot listen to the television or pick up a newspaper today without reading about some failure of leadership in virtually every segment of society, whether it is business, politics, government or families. Polls show that more than half of the American people are not proud of their national leaders. In its National Leadership Index, the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Merriman River Group released poll results showing that 70 percent of Americans believe that the United States faces a leadership crisis. This is not new information. We are aware of this dilemma, yet little has been done to make the corrections needed over the last decade. The question before us is: How do we tackle this situation and create new and creative leadership solutions?

I do not think there is an easy answer to this conundrum, but I fervently believe it will only begin to be resolved when each of us sees this as our problem. We must get involved individually and collectively to construct a vision that creates purpose and inspiration and commit ourselves as part of the solution. Only then can we begin to turn the leadership tide. Complaining about leadership is not going to remedy our disappointment or reverse the state of affairs.

As a consultant I have witnessed people who don't see themselves as leaders and seek leadership in other people. It's not necessary that everyone should have the title of leader; in fact, a critical part of leadership is followership. This unselfish role promotes and supports great leadership and is ultimately the decisive difference in execution. Followership not only provides a role that everyone can play, it produces and develops future leaders as well. I have found that people thrive when they are a part of meaningful purposes which result in accomplishment and gratification. This is particularly true in the workplace, where we all spend more time and energy than any other segment of our lives. Followership provides an enriching experience for all to contribute and develop their skills while making a difference. The collaboration between leaders and followers is significantly more effective as a team than any individual could achieve by him- or herself.

A quote from Theodore Roosevelt in 1910 that I heard referenced recently expresses these thoughts aptly.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly... who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Leadership is so consequential in numerous dimensions of the human experience that it cannot be ignored. Because of its scale we cannot put up with its failure. As the Roosevelt quote illustrates, we all have an opportunity to live a fulfilled life that makes a difference. When not performing to our abilities we are left with a huge void resulting in unhappiness and blaming others. I know there are times when we feel helpless to change events; however, it is more rewarding to play hard and lose than to be overwhelmed by events and surrender. When there is demand for excellence, things move from inertia to action. History has proven this to be true. It is important to remember that each of us has the power to say how it will be. I encourage everyone to take on overturning this leadership failure inside your chosen arena.