

Leadership as Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship is the operative principle in the manual arts. We admire artists and artisans who make things with their hands yet we often overlook the concept when it comes to working with our minds according to John Baldoni, an internationally recognized leadership educator, executive coach, author and contributor for a variety of online publications.

He suggests that the same can and should be said of leaders. Being in charge is not about the authority you possess; it's what you do with the authority you exert. A leader's job is to make things better for the organization. Those who use it for self-aggrandizement betray their authority; those who apply it to better the situation can emulate craftsman doing things slowly, carefully and exactly to get it right.

So how can a leader refine the leadership craft? Baldoni offers three suggestions.

Think. Consider what you want to accomplish with your power. Every craftsman has a picture in his head about what he would like to create, be it a desk, a meal or a garden. A leader can apply thinking to the organizational mission and apply his talents and skills toward fulfilling it for self and for team.

Act. How will you apply your power to accomplish your mission? And in this regard the leader takes a step back. The craft of leadership arises when you put the right people in place to do good things. And act to ensure that they have the resources and support they need to do their jobs well.

Reflect. What did I accomplish? Most craftsmen I know seldom appreciate their own work but they enjoy the work of fellow craftsmen, as Seinfeld appreciates the work of other comedic performers. Yet a leader needs to be more introspective by comparing the vision to the results. Did we – the people on the team and me – achieve what we set out to do? How well did we do it? And what will we do better the next time?

These ideas are merely starting points. Too much focus on the internals of leadership can lead to a kind of myopia, an “inside baseball” approach that reduces leadership to paint by numbers rather than a balance of doing what is right for the mission with what's right for the people who abide by the mission. That is focus on people as well as what they do.

Regarding leadership as a craft forces the leader to consider leadership as both art and practice. The practice comes from doing it; the art comes from knowing when to do it. And getting it right most of the time. Just like a fine craftsman.