

Supreme Leaders VS. Effective Leaders

For as long as I can remember I've heard people lament the state of organisations—Africa, the world we live in, etc. These sad, frustrated, scared observations are followed over and over again by the exclamation: “It's lack of leadership!” Because lack of leadership or poor leadership is seen as one of Africa's biggest challenges, we find ourselves calling for or trying to be “strong leaders”, sometimes even in the form of a “benevolent dictator”.

Be careful what you ask for, for you may receive. A dictator is a person holding complete autocratic control. This means, in the best case, that the people have given over total power to one person, trusting completely that this person will decide and act in their best interests, saving them from destruction and securing their future. Historically, dictators were installed by the senate of ancient Rome in emergency situations.

However benevolent the intentions of this person may be, can any human being be trusted to this extent? Can it be ethical for any person to accept such a mandate? The dictator, per definition, will always extinguish independent thinking and contributions from followers. Can the long-term effect of this form of leadership ever be empowering? What do individuals, organisations and societies really need from their leaders in order to ensure survival, sustainability and growth?

As Robert Dilts (NLP coach and author) says, “Leadership is about creating a world to which

people want to belong.” Do we do this with the power we hold as leaders? When are we creating and empowering, when are we destroying and dis-empowering?

The latest Star Wars movie shows us some typical examples of the dark (dis-empowering) and light (empowering) sides of leadership and the ongoing tension between the two. Much of the dark side is represented by the First Order and their Supreme Leader, who issues top-down commands, rules by fear, finds fault, punishes harshly, and is obsessed by maintaining and increasing his own personal power.

This, of course, determines the leadership culture within the whole organisation or society. It is no secret that leaders shape culture through their own behaviour. The obsession with personal power and advancement starts with the Supreme Leader and can be observed in all other leaders along the hierarchical chain of the First Order. Within this leadership culture, individual leaders spend a lot of energy on appearing strong, hiding their own vulnerabilities, identifying where others are vulnerable and using these vulnerabilities against them.

Like predators they nourish themselves at the expense of others and value territories over relationships.

This Supreme Leader type can be quite successful in the short term, which makes it so seductive to go there for quick results, to show-off and to boost self-esteem. The opening crawl of Star Wars: The Last Jedi begins as follows:

“... The First Order reigns. Having decimated the peaceful Republic, Supreme Leader Snoke now deploys his merciless legions to seize military control of the galaxy...”

Even if they comply with the leader’s wishes at first, in the long term, followers who have been dis-empowered and trained to focus on destruction will begin to resist or rebel at some point. When they do so, they turn what power they may still find within themselves against the leader they once trusted.

This is how the Supreme Leader is destroyed, the entire organisation confused and left without purpose. In a nutshell, Supreme Leaders are ineffective because they actively dis-empower others, and inadvertently themselves, too. Let’s remember that the next time we think we need

to go after our workforce with a big stick... or a laser weapon.

In contrast, Effective Leaders focus on a clear purpose, which they share with their followers. As Simon Sinek says, they “start with why”. This purpose comes with strong common values and shared goals. General Leia Organa, the leader of the Resistance in the Star Wars movie, focusses on keeping the Resistance alive and inspired to build a brighter future. Many of our real-life leaders started out that way, too, but then got distracted along the way.

It is very easy to get distracted by short-term successes, including fame, power, and wealth. Leaders need to remember that not their own heroic image, but what they accomplish through their followers, is the key to long-term effectiveness.

Leia leads in a flexible, nurturing way, recognising the individual potential of followers as well as their needs. She caters to these needs and therefore enables people to grow. At the same time, she is not a walk over and can clearly tell the difference between actual needs and immature wants, which are irrelevant or even destructive for the greater whole. Collaborating with others, inviting feedback, and respecting other people’s contributions and points of view adds to her effectiveness, as does her ability to express herself freely and appropriately.

When this type of leader is lying unconscious in sick bay for a while (living with vulnerability), others will carry on planning and working towards the common goal – bearing in mind the learnings they received from her. They will cope with rapid change and will do whatever they can to protect her and nurture her back to strength.

The traits of the Effective Leader described above are essentially what Susannah Temple (originator of the Functional Fluency Model and TIFF profiling system) calls the ‘Fabulous Five’ keys to effectiveness:

- Reality assessment
- Guiding and directing
- Looking after people
- Relating to others
- Expressing my self

The starting point—the first key—is about being mindful of the present, making sense of what is going on here and now, noticing, realising. This includes taking into account possibilities of light and dark, assessing significances and



considering consequences. Another commonality between the Star Wars characters and real-life human leaders is that they are not inherently good or evil, effective or ineffective. They hold the potential for both within themselves and constantly have to decide what action to take within the tension between light and dark. The mindfulness described above enables leaders to consciously respond to what is going on and therefore to effectively use the other four keys.

The stories of leadership development shown in Star Wars are not stories of perfect leadership, but stories of learning through success and failure. Every leader must have experienced bad days where, under stress, mindfulness disappears out of the window and ineffective autopilot reactions kick in. We may focus on what has gone wrong and put people down. We may overdo the helping hand and fail to set limits. We may resist with aggression or passivity. We may react on impulse in a self-centered way, without thought for the consequences.

It is incredibly useful to notice unintended consequences of our actions, to reflect on them and learn from them for the future. Legendary role models, mentors and coaches play an important part in developing the next generation of leaders.

Even long-time leaders, who are role models themselves are not exempt from making mistakes and learning from them. Sometimes they need to be nudged into this awareness by someone younger and less experienced. This is perhaps the biggest challenge, especially for many of our respected African elders, who believe that they must know everything all the time and that hiring a coach equals showing weakness.

As John Maxwell observes, “Leadership develops daily, not in a day”. For this journey of development from day to day I wish all of us as leaders a good dose of humbleness and that “the force be with us”. ▲

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