

Is Everyone a Leader?

Almost everywhere I go someone asks me a specific question. Usually it is asked by a person who already has an answer -- they just want to hear what I'll say to this seemingly obvious inquiry:

"Is everyone a leader?"

The answer, of course, is yes and no. (How's that for a politically correct answer?) It all depends on how you define the word "leader." If you define it in the traditional fashion -- someone with a position, in charge of a group of people in an organization -- then my answer is no. Not everyone and certainly not every student has the natural skills to become the president, the CEO or the key leader of a large team of people. Most will never occupy the top spot in a flow chart. Perhaps only ten percent of the population will. For the sake of discussion, we'll call these people Leaders with a capital "L."

If leadership means possessing a natural ability to organize groups of people to accomplish a task, then it's exclusive and obviously not for everyone. In fact, we will frustrate students by telling them they are *Leaders* only to disappoint them with a lofty ideal they'll never attain. Most of the arguments surrounding this big question boil down to contrasting definitions.

If we define leadership, however, in a different manner, it opens up an entirely new perspective for students. What if leadership is more about people pursuing a "passion" in their life, a passion with which they will influence others in its fulfillment? What if it has more to do with finding an area of strength and in using that strength, they naturally influence others in a positive way?

It seems to me every one of us possesses some area of strength that enables us to influence others in that area. We master some skill or industry and exercise dominion in a healthy way. Michael Jordan did this in basketball; Bill Gates did it in the field of technology. Now they are influencers. They have power. Certainly, mankind has perverted this idea of authority and power. History is full of leaders who tried to lead and rule others by force, such as Nero, Stalin, Hitler, and Saddam Hussein. But we cannot let counterfeits of good leadership convince us that leadership is bad or impossible. In fact, if there is a counterfeit, it generally means there is something genuine that is valuable.

I believe leadership is about serving others in the area of our natural abilities and passions. When we do, we predictably ripple with influence. We don't even have to try to "lead" others. So, as we mature, we are to naturally uncover our area of strength and influence a sum of people. We may not even have a position at the top of a flow chart, but we lead. Because this is a larger segment of the population, it might be helpful to call these people leaders with a lower case "l." They are *leaders*, not *Leaders*. They are everywhere, and we must prepare them to influence their world. This is why I choose to define leadership in this way:

Leadership is using my influence for a worthwhile cause.

Let me say it another way. These two kinds of leaders (*Leaders* and *leaders*) can be defined as HABITUAL leaders and SITUATIONAL leaders. *Habitual leaders* are the natural ones who tend to be good at leading whatever group in which they participate. They feel natural taking charge and running point on just about any project. They lead out of habit. *Situational leaders* are those people who make up the rest of us; the majority of the population. Most *Situational leaders* don't even feel like leaders until they find the right situation that fits their passions and their strengths. Once in the area of their strength, they come alive and become the right one to lead in that particular situation. This is why a central goal for mentors ought to be to help emerging leaders find their "situation." This situation is likely where a person will fulfill their purpose and leverage their best influence.

Gotta Have It

In 2000, the Kellogg Foundation published a report on the status of leadership on university campuses in North America. The report included both state and private schools and was compiled by Dr. Helen and Alexander Astin from UCLA. Their conclusions were intriguing. Let me summarize a few of them here:

1. Every student has the potential to be a leader.
2. Leadership cannot be separated from values.
3. Leadership skills must be taught.
4. In today's world, every student will need leadership skills.

Interestingly, it appears that I'm not the only one who's concluded that leadership may be a wider category than we first thought. This study concluded it should not be limited to the people who hold top positions in an organization. More and more researchers agree, leadership is a 360-degree proposition. Most people who influence where teams are going, where corporations are going, where non-profits are going -- in fact, where nations are going -- are not the chief executives of those organizations. We lead up, we lead around and we lead down in organizations. Dee Hock, former CEO of Visa International, was the first person I heard propose this notion, and I believe he's right on. Influence happens everywhere and often from the middle of the pack.

This is why I teach that every student who is willing has the potential to lead and influence others. They may never be *Leaders* but they are already *leaders*. For years I've reminded people that sociologists say the most introverted of people will influence 10,000 others in an average lifetime. In others words, every one of us, even the shy ones, are influencing people around us. My question is: what breadth of positive influence could people have who become intentional about it?

Naturally, some folks are going to turn out to be better leaders than others. Some will actually become excellent at organizing large teams of people or at speaking to large groups of people and casting vision to them. But leadership isn't limited to these skills. If it's only for the skilled people, then we'll never accomplish the good that needs to happen in our lifetime.

So, let's embrace our role as influencers. Let's learn to lead and influence in a manner appropriate with our strengths and not excuse ourselves because we'll never be Colin Powell, Bill Gates or Mother Teresa. Leadership is meant for every one of us, to some degree. It's about becoming the person we were designed to be. It is less about position and more about disposition. It is not so much about superiority but about service in the area of our strengths. It has less to do with a set of behaviors and more to do with a perspective with which we view life. When we define it this way, it puts the cookies on the bottom shelf. Every one of us can lead.

SO WHAT?

This motivates me to invest in others -- particularly the next generation of students -- so they can discover what is inside of them and pursue their destiny. My guess is, you have this Teacher's Guide because you want to do that, too. And you want to do it well. This guide is here to help. May this be a leadership journey for both you and your students.

Dr. Tim Elmore
www.GrowingLeaders.com