

Disciplined Leadership

True leaders are made, not just born

by Nicholas Dungan

Leadership takes work. To be sure, some individuals come into this world with qualities and talents that suit them well for future leadership: charisma, articulateness, penetrating insight, an impressive presence. But just as is the case for an athlete or an artist, these natural gifts will be of little use if they are not exercised, trained and sustained. Discipline is required both to develop leadership initially and to maintain it thereafter.

For that discipline to be made manifest and to prove effective, one must recognise the basic requirements and core components of true leadership. These are: self-possession, integrity and vision.

Self-possession is more than social poise

The term 'self-possession' often refers to not losing one's cool in public or in social circumstances, but the self-possession required of a leader or future leader goes much further than that and incorporates the entire possession of oneself from a physical, intellectual and spiritual as well as a social perspective.

The leader's physical self-possession results not only from self-restraint but from self-improvement. Azorín, in the opening words of *El Político*, says 'The primary requirement of a statesman is physical strength. His body must be healthy and strong.' — and in our time this is obviously a truth universally acknowledged as being equally applicable to female and male leaders alike. Regular challenging physical exercise and the practice of one or more competitive sports provide a constant stimulus and testing of the self; if performed in a strenuous enough fashion, they move the leader or future leader quite literally outside her or his comfort zone, enabling them to withstand discomfort and even pain. They expand the leader's appreciation of her or his own capabilities and they contribute to the leader's sense of accomplishment. In a similar but contrasting way, the self-discipline that is necessary to eat and drink sparingly, to maintain optimum weight as well as overall fitness, is conducive both to a sense of self-control and to an image of power and style.

Intellectual self-possession involves thinking about how well we are thinking, about questioning one's assumptions, recognising that one does not have all the answers. The consequence of intellectual self-possession is an unquenchable thirst for lifelong learning, an insatiable appetite for intelligence — not just information — which drives the leader or future leader not only towards contemporary best thinking but chiefly to the wisdom of the ages contained in lessons from history, philosophy and mind-expanding fiction. Adding a creative activity — music, writing, photography, art — diverts the leader's attention away from the weighty issues of the day, as Winston Churchill

describes so delightfully in his charming essay 'Painting as a Pastime', and offers an outlet that expands the leader's scope of sensitivity and discernment.

Spiritual self-possession is encouraged through the study of philosophy, the recognition of the lessons of the great religions and the leader's own capacity for contemplation and meditation.

Thus equipped with hard-earned self-possession, the leader or future leader is prepared to interact with others. She or he will be economical with words, naturally inclined to listen, comfortable with silence. She or he will project serenity, indifference to display, good humour — and a sense of humour — even, indeed especially, in adversity. Such outward and visible signs of an inward and individual equilibrium create an aura of respect and even mystery around the leader, which the leader will know how to use to her or his advantage when the time is ripe.

Integrity is holistic

In everyday parlance, integrity signifies honesty, uprightness, ethical probity, fair dealing. The word derives from the Latin *integer* which etymologically means 'un-touched' and therefore untainted or pure. We can and should expect disciplined leaders to display integrity of this kind.

But *integer* also means 'whole', 'complete', 'entire'. In English, 'integrity' has somewhat lost this signification, yet in this broader, more encompassing construction, integrity applies acutely well to leaders and future leaders. Beyond good behaviour, they must demonstrate unimpeachable character, the willingness to accept responsibility, the ability to incur risks, the courage to face danger, the resolve to carry on regardless, the implacability to endure contumely, the steadfastness to steer through turbulence, tempests and turmoil. We have every right to hold our leaders to this standard of wholeness.

Vision respects reality

Visionary leaders provide not just a policy but a purpose. They set higher goals than their own ambitions or the attainment of empty or easy gains. They curve their conception above the here and now. They designate a destination that arches beyond time and place. They offer to their followers both an aspiration to achieve and the inspiration to believe that their purpose is valid and that it is veritable. Far from promising what they cannot deliver, or chasing an impossible dream, they anchor their judgements in a sense of reality that respects the facts, calculates the contingencies and is infused with the awareness of the all-too-human hopes and fears of their followers.

True leaders will be followed

Having developed and maintained these essential qualities of leadership — self-possession, integrity and vision — how can a leader be sure of winning followers? One cannot be a leader if there is no one there to be led. The answer lies in the effect the leader produces upon others: the essential effect of true leadership is the empowerment of others. From that empowerment will flow those followers' conviction that the leader is worthy of their trust, their faith and their destiny.