

## **Rediscovering Leadership – a practitioner’s perspective**

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Good leadership these days seems to be a scarce virtue – all the more as it is or should be a key theme for all of us – and a topic of vital relevance in the new strategic environment:

Russia has shattered peace in Europe and beyond. It presents the most significant and direct threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area. Authoritarian actors challenge our interests, values and democratic way of life. Conflicts and wars in the Middle East and Africa abound.

While Russia wages an unjustified and brutal war against Ukraine and its people for more than two years, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky has provided outstanding leadership to his country in peril.

In contrast on the dark side of history, Russia’s President Putin has to date only reaffirmed his grip on power, which was recently confirmed via the façade presidential “elections” in March.

But where are the good and morally strong leaders of the rest of the world to be their counterparts? It’s hard to say.

Outside of national politics, when looking at international organisations such as NATO, the leadership score presents a rather mixed picture.

One of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most famous leaders, Winston Churchill, pointed out that “Many like to learn, few like to be taught.” In that spirit, let me outline what I have learned about leadership and offer 10 leadership insights – based on my own experience gained over some three decades in NATO and the EU.

A good way to start – and a good way to silence a room of executives is to ask: “Why should anyone be led by you?” – a rather sobering question (and also the title of one of my favorite books about leadership). Like many questions, it is easier to ask than to answer. But let’s try: So, what makes a good leader?

1. Be authentic: To be a leader, you need to have followers. And followers choose to be led by humans not by robots, titles, or credentials. However, politicians these days all too often seem to be a never-ending source of empty drivel and buzzword speech bubbles. Opportunism seems a key feature for career progress.

Reality TV and social media are just two signs that people seek genuineness. To be authentic, leaders need to be courageous, sincere and accountable. Moreover, they should be able to display their individual characteristics, as well as their foibles and strengths. Authentic leaders are consistent. Their words match their actions. And remember, actions speak louder than words!

You can try to pretend to be “someone else” for a while, but eventually people will find out. Striving for authenticity is not always easy. The culture of many organizations encourages role-playing and conformity – which clearly hinder authenticity. During NATO Summits or Ministerial meetings, most national representatives read out, often in poor English, their pre-prepared, convoluted statements. A real discussion happens, at best, outside of the actual meeting.

2. Be courageous: Leadership is about taking decisions and responsibility, and that always implies taking risks. Churchill knew: “Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all others.” It seems that this virtue is particularly hard to find in our times.

Instead, what is prevailing is a mixture of fear, procrastination, and cowardice. In the face of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the world continues to provide too little support too late – only to then complain about Ukrainians not making the desired progress in defending their country. The key argument typically used is that more support to Ukraine would trigger an escalation on the Russian side. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. President Putin is not operating on an escalation and de-escalation ladder. Rather he respects strengths and exploits weaknesses. Wherever he can, he fosters fears, procrastination, and cowardice – to use to his advantage – and we are all too prepared to fall into that trap ever and ever again.

As the German philosopher Wilhelm Schmid recently put it: “Those who long for peace now, need to support those who have been attacked. Because that is the only language that men

of violence understand. Men of violence do not crumble because someone whispers appeals for peace into their ears.”

To manage risks, “situation sensing” is key. Leaders rely on intuition to gauge the appropriate timing and course of action. They sense what’s going on or what is likely to come without having all aspects spelled out. Albert Einstein knew this when he sentenced: “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

3. Provide significance and spark excitement: People want to believe that their efforts matter. That the energy and time they invest in something makes a difference. And leaders need to recognize and acknowledge contributions made in a meaningful way. People want to feel part of something bigger, a community, and leaders must help them to connect to the overarching purpose. They also need a spark to trigger great performance. Leaders articulating their own clear vision, passion and values instill energy and enthusiasm. This is perhaps an area where making the case in NATO is comparatively easy: Our mission is peace and security. This is our vision – and the means towards that end are deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management and cooperative security. And I remain passionate about it: Contributing to building peace matters!

4. Set clear direction: I remember the former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson stating on his first day in office his three key priorities: capabilities, capabilities and capabilities. That was a clear strategic orientation – as you can gather from the fact that I still remember it. What is more, he stuck to it during his tenure at NATO. Not all nations appreciated this assertive style. Some quipped that he should remember his job title being “Secretary General” – and not “General”.

5. Avoid stereotypes and fixed recipes: Like with many things in life, there is no “one size fits all”. There is no “leadership cookbook” you just have to apply and all is fine. Leadership depends on the situation and the people you deal with. As it depends on the context, getting a good sense of the situation is fundamental. When settings change, a good leader needs to understand the new circumstances.

For women, it is also important to avoid the leadership stereotype: “Women take care – and Men take charge” - as actually both are needed for men AND women. In addition, there is the related “influence trap” for women: Women adopting a more “take care” style are often

liked – but not seen as a leader. Conversely, if they adopt a more “take charge style”, show assertiveness, they tend to be seen as competent – but not personable or well liked.

A leader should also display “tough empathy” which means giving people what they need, not necessarily what they want. Leaders must empathize passionately and realistically with employees or constituents, care intensely about what they do, and be straightforward with them.

6. Remember: Leadership is NOT hierarchical: This may from the outset sound like a bit of a provocation as it comes from someone working in an organization like NATO. Still, in my mind this is a huge opportunity. In essence, it means that there can be leaders at EVERY level. It implies that leadership and leaders at all levels throughout an organization can contribute to strengthening its performance. So, getting people to lead in their respective area is a massive advantage!

7. Lead by example: This may sound a bit old hat, but I believe it remains relevant. You cannot expect others to be committed to high performance, professionalism and be transparent in their work, if you yourself do not adhere to these standards. You simply lose credibility as a leader – and a leader without credibility ceases to be one.

NATO’s track record in selecting good people for leadership positions provides a rather mixed picture: Especially the top positions are often and mainly driven by national quota and interests, with merit at best being considered a secondary criterion. This has led over the decades to the appointment of too many with poor leadership and often also poor management qualifications.

In my experience, adhering to three basic principles is key: Treat people the way you would like to be treated by them. Also, heed Immanuel Kant’s principle to regard people as an end in themselves, and never use them merely as a means to your ends. And remember: Loyalty is not a one-way street. If you want people to be loyal to you, you must be loyal to them.

8. Do not confuse leadership with management: Leadership is about setting the direction and enabling people to follow that direction because you motivate and inspire them. This is about “doing the right thing”. Management is “doing things right” - through planning and budgeting, organising and staffing, monitoring, and problem solving. Leadership and management should go hand in hand – but there is no guarantee they will:

There can be great leaders – and poor managers – as well as great managers being poor leaders. Don't think that if you are a good manager, you are automatically a good leader.

9. Know yourself: Leadership begins with you. You simply cannot succeed as a leader unless you have a good sense of who you are. This implies knowing your strengths – and your weaknesses. Showing a weakness (other than a fatal flaw) implies that you are human and approachable. It helps to build trust and strengthen commitment. Knowing yourself also implies knowing the factors that make you different and understanding how to display some of these differences effectively. To be or become a leader, something in you should be “unique”. And you can think of many ways to achieve this: Leaders can be vocal and outspoken or the opposite; they can use casual or elegant clothing; or they can associate themselves with a “slogan” or key message.

So, this is about managing the ‘natural’ tension between individualism on one side, and conformity on the other. To understand yourself, seek feedback and constructive criticism. A 360-degree feedback and friends or family members who will tell you the truth can be enormously helpful – even (or especially) if you do not like everything, you should listen.

10. Learn to leverage the power of your network and your communication: All organisations are networks of formal and informal systems. The best leader learns to leverage both the formal and the informal “hidden” structures. It is through networking that commitment can be forged and change supported. Good people in your network tell you the truth, no matter how unpleasant. It is the quality of the network, which allows for more comprehensive situation sensing – in the spirit that four eyes see more than two. Leadership depends on relationships, which in turn depend on communication. Leaders need to choose the right channel of communication, the right content, and the right tone. Some do better in formal settings, others prefer informal exchanges.

While logic and reason are important to developing strategies, what motivates more are stories and narratives. Good stories involve people in a challenge, the pursuit of a goal. You can use humor, personal experience or any other event evoking emotions. To illustrate: I remember a leadership course where a young woman from South Africa told her story of climbing the Mount Everest. It was a daunting formative experience, and at one point close to disaster. In that situation, she received a phone call from Nelson Mandela, telling her how

proud he was of her and that he believed in her getting to the top. She made it – and henceforth cherished “Mandela Moments”.

Leadership is neither easy, nor easily described. It can come from the least expected of sources or be lacking where it is most needed.

Today, our leaders in the West are being tested in many ways. Even more worryingly, the same is happening to our values. These are times that call for courageous leaders who stand up for our values.

*N.B. The views expressed in this Op-Ed are the author’s own and should not be taken to reflect necessarily those of NATO or NATO allies.*

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