

Some 'leaders' haven't earned the title

Leadership. To me, the word has become a cliché. It's a term used too often, a description inserted without much forethought or much relevance.

Like "innovative," "creative" and "quality," "leader" has lost its ability to convey the unique set of traits and behaviors that it is supposed to embody. It is being abused. Why?

Are we experiencing a shortage of real leaders in this community and country, and we feel reassured if we simply loosen the rules of application? Are we becoming such lazy communicators that we can't actually describe why someone is deserving of being tagged a leader?

I think it's because we've forgotten, or fail to fully understand, what a true leader is and does.

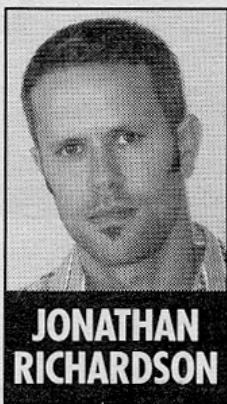
Who's someone you would identify as a leader? What makes them a leader in your eyes? Do you think that the dictionary definition of a leader is an accurate description of what they do?

I looked up "lead" in my dictionary and discovered more than a dozen definitions. Here are the first three:

- 1: to guide on a way, especially by going in advance
- 2: to go through, live
- 3: to direct the operations, activity or performance of

Think of the historical leaders who are introduced through our education. Why are people decades, even centuries, later interested in what they accomplished?

Did they run a successful business, were they great at directing the operations, activities or performance of others? Possibly. But we remember them because they went in advance; they solved problems or invented solutions in new and unique ways.



There are certainly CEOs and elected officials who do the same, but merely possessing those titles does not make one a leader. I don't think career or business success is synonymous with leadership, or that true leadership

always results in success. I don't believe that leaders are always effective in all aspects of their lives either. And in my opinion, popularity is not a prerequisite for leadership.

I propose we adopt the first definition as our official definition of the word "lead." I have expanded on the definition by listing the qualifications I use to identify true leaders:

- The individuals must have a unique approach or solution to a situation or problem; or they must be willing or capable of doing something others won't or can't do. (We'll call this their vision.)

- They must have accepted risk in order to make their vision become a reality. (The risk can be financial, emotional, physical or otherwise.)

- The vision must positively affect the lives of other people.

Follow these rules of usage and I believe the real leaders in this community will become more visible. But to save the word "leader" entirely, to stop the abuse, will require more. I suggest we remove the designation of leader from anyone who received it simply because he or she:

- holds a supervisory or executive position in the community or at work
- got the role through succession
- is wealthy
- has a well-known namesake
- hangs out with leaders
- was nominated for or received some bogus award

I'll be the first to admit that I do not fulfill my own qualifications for being a leader. Not yet. But when and if I do meet my own requirements, I'll go in advance and strive to be original and effective.

I think if anyone is going to put forth the effort to be a real leader, he or she should strive to be the kind that's worth remembering tomorrow, next year and in the next century. □

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