

Tomorrow's leaders – qualities, expectations and limitations

Mark T. Jones

Centre for Innovative Leadership Navigation (CILN), London, UK

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Abstract

In a world beset by so many challenges it is not unnatural that we look for remarkable individuals to help find solutions and a way forward. The issue of leadership and what constitutes an effective leader continues to exercise people periodically, with to date no consensus on what is required and how we go about providing a fertile environment to nurture future leaders. Whilst there may be an absence of an agreed definition as to how to provide the appropriate scaffolding that assists exceptional individuals to rise to positions where they are called upon to lead, there is at least a growing realisation in both the public and private sector that a leadership deficit exists. In acknowledging the existence of a problem, we can at least begin to explore means of addressing the issue in a logical manner. A key element of this process of defining and appraising the need is of course the unique local conditions that have shaped our understanding of leadership and the way in which leaders are viewed. History looms large in human experience and thus management theorists must be wary of thinking that simple formulae can provide solutions to what is a complex subject that is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, there needs to be a general agreement of the core qualities and expectations we have of those who might well be called upon to assume leadership roles. Equally, it is important that there is a recognition that some individuals rise from apparent obscurity by dint of their own labours and extraordinary personal qualities and may well assume leadership and shape leadership roles of their own volition or as a result of extraordinary circumstances and events.

In the world of business an individual such as Tidjane Thiam, formerly of the Prudential and now head of the Swiss banking titan Credit Suisse can be admired for his exceptional qualities of leadership, but can we agree on what those leadership qualities are? Such is the current political climate of criticism and censure of those in board rooms or amongst the body politic that expectations of leaders appear to ricochet between universal condemnation of them and unreasonably high expectations of what they can achieve in any particular field. Citizens appear battered and bruised to such an extent that cynicism is widespread and as a consequence debate and discussion around the subject of leadership lacks an equilibrium and rationality. Whilst such jaundiced views or false hopes are perfectly understandable, if serious consideration of what constitutes tomorrow's leaders is to take place there needs to be a more measured reflection and analysis of leadership and the way in which leaders serve and shape and execute their vision with foresight and empathy.

For all the current turbulence and self doubt it is heartening to see academia beginning to play its part in addressing the leadership deficit. The likes of the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford are not only highlighting the importance of the subject, but are endeavouring to provide a fertile and stimulating environment that will shape and support those who occupy or aspire to leadership roles. Questions also need to be asked of our expectations and of the tools that are deployed as part of the selection process for those deemed eligible for roles of immense responsibility. Leadership must not be looked upon as a mere course component or something that might comprise certification, so central is it to the development and security of humankind that we would all do well be willing to seek to codify it whilst providing sufficient room to let it soar in a spirit of original creativity liberty.