

THE QUALITIES OF EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP

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Cultivating excellence in the next generation of Jewish leaders can be compared to the work of a casting director in Hollywood. Through the course of her day the casting director sees countless talented actors many of whom, given the right break, could emerge as stars. But the job of the casting director is not to find the next star but to place the actor in the right situation that will create the perfect ensemble for a hit movie.

Similar to casting a movie, pinpointing excellence in Jewish leadership is an art form. There is no objective, scientific quality of “excellence” embodied by some people and not others. The art of cultivating excellence involves identifying people who exhibit certain qualities and then helping them to hone those qualities so that they can exercise leadership to impact our organizations, communities and the Jewish world. The way an individual wields and deploys these universal qualities is what adds up to excellence. Before we discuss some of those qualities, though, it is important to define this wily term “leadership.”

You don’t need to dig too deep to find a myriad of definitions of leadership. For the purposes of this essay, we will define leadership as the skillful intervention in a group situation to effect positive change. It doesn’t need to be a revolutionary move (though it could be). Exercising leadership skillfully can mean simply asking the right question at the right moment in the right way. Alternatively, it can mean remaining silent at the right moment. Or it can mean giving your version of the “I Have a Dream” speech in front of thousands. Regardless of the scope, leadership entails inserting yourself in a way that can move a group in a new direction toward good. Usually such interventions require being an agent of change. And change inevitably means loss for some people. So those who exercise leadership will often encounter resistance. And to do that work skillfully, effectively, and with excellence, one must bring several qualities to bear.

The first five of these qualities are framed as a calibration between extremes. Skillful leadership is a balancing act of how and when to exhibit just the right amount of a particular quality. As Maimonides wrote, “The upright path is the middle path of all of the qualities known to people” (Laws of Understanding 1:4).

Humility vs. Confidence

This calibration is famously illustrated in Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Pzhysha’s teaching that “Everyone must have two pockets that they can reach into the one or the other, according to their needs. In the right pocket are the words: ‘For my sake the world was created,’ and in the left: ‘I am but dust and ashes.’” Exercising leadership is an act of courage requiring faith that you are just the right person to be intervening in that particular moment. It also requires humility to know that you will not succeed unless you genuinely create space for others to lead as well, and especially to know

when you are not the right person to intervene. Just as in life, finding the sweet spot between overconfidence and utter lack of self-esteem is essential.

Patience vs. Urgency

Hillel the Elder's question of "If not now, when?" often is taken as rhetorical, but it can also be seen as an actual question and a way to do a reality check. We might think that our leadership intervention is the right way to go, but we need to be reflective and ask ourselves if this is indeed the right time. Do I need to do it now? Will I be more successful if I wait until a more opportune time? Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky (*Leadership on the Line*) note that leadership means disappointing people at the rate they can absorb. Waiting for the right situation and moment will be crucial to doing just that. Moving too quickly might mean that you are suggesting changes to people who are not ready to hear that news. Waiting too long might mean that you miss the opportunity altogether. Skillful leadership can balance taking the long view with the "fierce urgency of now" exhorted by Martin Luther King Jr.

Humor vs. Seriousness of Mission

Excellence cannot emerge if we don't see benefiting the Jewish People as being of utmost importance. But being serious about your work does not mean that laughter and levity cannot pervade all that you do. Humor means that there is room for joy in our work—and there is no excellence without joy. The right dosage of humor also leads to an equanimity that is required in the tumult of our daily professional lives. If we fill our work with humor there will be very little room left for anger. Even in our holy work as Jewish professionals or volunteers we are barraged with egos, politics and daily disappointment. A healthy sense of humor can foster a calm perspective to see the blessings of our special work through the fog of the many frustrations.

Grit vs. Quit

Grit refers to the "passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. ... It is living life like a marathon, not a sprint" (Duckworth et al., "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals"). Grit requires all of the calibrations noted above and a commitment to the long game. This is definitely true for cultivating future Jewish leaders. Our personal projects may be years in the making, and the grand Jewish project is millennia long. It may take an entire career to realize the impact that we had—and we may have to take it on faith that we have actually had an impact. Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot (2:15) reminds us that "the day is short and the task is great." Grit means that we will stick it out specifically because the task is great, that we will work hard every day and nourish ourselves on the small successes along the way. We also have to know when our projects are going nowhere and when it is wise cut bait. Mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn writes that sometimes just stopping is an act of sanity and love. Excellence in leadership requires us to know when and where is the right time for grit.

Optimism vs. Realism

As we noted above, leadership is the skillful use of one's self to intervene in a group situation to affect positive change. If we don't think that the Jewish world has the possibility of continued positive change then we are in the wrong business. The Jewish world needs optimists. Exercising leadership means having a robust imagination of what the future can be and then doing something to work towards it. Optimism is contagious, so don't keep it to yourself. Inspired leadership requires us to share our optimism with others. It could, in fact, result in a self-fulfilling prophecy of

an amazing Jewish future. Of course, unbridled optimism can veer into naiveté. While remaining optimistic, skillful leadership necessitates a keen sense of seeing things as they really are. If we are able to have a clear view of reality then we can intervene more skillfully to bring about a better future.

The next three qualities do not need to be framed as part of a balance. They are important to have in abundance, and excellent, skillful leaders can benefit from exhibiting more of these.

Curiosity

Leadership excellence requires curiosity. There are two types of curiosity. The first is being curious about the world. Excellent leaders have an expansive definition of what is relevant to their work and aim to learn more and more about the world to enhance their skills. Harry Truman said, “All leaders are readers.” Being a skilled Jewish leader requires continued learning, secular and Jewish, even when it is not obviously relevant to your day-to-day tasks. The second type of curiosity is a genuine interest in other people. If leadership is about impacting people, then it makes sense that honing a curiosity about their motivations, interests, passions, feelings, opinions and sensitivities is important. Of course, most of us make it through our days not asking people about these things. Instead, we operate from assumptions that are essentially made-up stories, because we are not in the habit of asking people profound questions. Genuine curiosity helps us to get real information on which we can base our leadership interventions. Curious leaders ask real questions about the world and about the people they work with.

Compassion

Compassion means that we are aware of other people’s suffering, connecting with them, and responding to them with help (Roger Schwarz, “What Stops Leaders from Showing Compassion”). The people we work with need our compassion, especially when we are intervening to suggest change. We must understand that the status quo exists for a reason, even if it serves to hold back the group, and many people are comfortable with it. Our intervention can upset the balance of that status quo and create anxiety. People will be more open to change if they know that we are aware of their uncertainties and that we can hold their interests and the group’s interest in mind at the same time. It does not mean that we agree with them on an issue or that they will get their way. It does mean that we will respond to their resistance with curiosity and help.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a term coined by Wayne Payne and popularized by Daniel Goleman. It refers to our ability to be aware of our emotions and the emotions of others, name them, and respond appropriately. Whether or not it is actually “intelligence” (researchers disagree on this point), we nonetheless want our Jewish leaders to be self-aware and sensitive to others in the moment. Some view emotional intelligence as a leadership skill of “reading the room” and responding appropriately (rather than a quality). Regardless, emotional intelligence needs to be combined with the qualities noted above in order to truly exercise leadership by intervening to bring about positive change in a group, an organization, or a Jewish community.

These are just some of the qualities that we look for when seeking to nurture excellence in emerging talent. Having a deeper insight into these qualities is the first step in identifying those

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who can exercise transformative leadership courageously and skillfully. The subsequent steps require doing the hard work of honing those qualities in ourselves and in those we work with—a lifelong effort and a subject for another article.

Our future Jewish leaders not only need to be talented at the technical skills of their professional or volunteer roles, but they also need to root their work in Jewish values and be virtuosos of the qualities of leadership. And just like the Hollywood casting director, we must remember that while it is nice to discover the next star, the real success is having a great ensemble that contributes to the hit movie. Excellence means finding people who are skilled practitioners who embody these qualities of leadership so they can be part of a community of leaders who can help Jewish life bring goodness to the world. And no movie is more exciting than that.

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