

## **THOUGHT LEADERS ON LEADERSHIP**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the concept of thought leadership through interviews with eleven people who define the term. Representing business, ministry, education, media and psychology, these individuals provided answers to six questions about leadership. All interviewees are respected by their peers, are often admired by others outside their industry and have made notable contributions to their areas of expertise. The responses from each are synthesized into sections pertaining to each question in such a way as to compare and contrast their statements to divine similarities and differences from which conclusions can be drawn.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A thought leader is an individual with influence over others whose ideas inspire action and whose actions generate trust. Operating from a broad base of experience, a thought leader influences others to enact a change they envision (Thomas, 2004). A thought leader's realm is ideas, not their implementation. This paper presents interviews with eleven thought leaders representing business, ministry, education, media and psychology who were interviewed through a variety of means – in person, over the phone and by e-mail. They include the following:

Participant 1, the pastor of a Los Angeles church who is also an author, speaker, television personality and community leader; Participant 2, the founder of a worldwide ministry with over 500 churches; Participant 3, an information technology director for a worldwide aerospace company; Participant 4, the head psychologist with the Los Angeles Police Department SMART Team, which deals with mentally ill individuals; Participant 5, an entrepreneur, stockbroker and writer, who founded a daily investment newspaper.

Also interviewed were Participant 6, a media psychology professor focused on the effects of the media on psychological processes; Participant 7, A conservative, openly gay, radio personality on Los Angeles' KABC (AM 790). Participant 8: A radio talk show host on KTLK (AM 1150) in Los Angeles. Participant 9: the dean of a school of business at a private Florida university. Participant 10: the division chair and professor of history at a Southern California community college. Participant 11: a KABC (AM 790) host who opposes illegal immigration, defends private property rights, supports gay marriage and believes in legalizing marijuana.

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### **Question 1: How would you describe your leadership style?**

Most participants believed in delegating responsibility to others as a method to convey trust and encouragement. “I developed as a leader on the job. I am great at delegating,” said Participant 1 (D. Nwokorie, personal communication, February 2007). In line with delegating responsibility, transformational leadership was the preferred leadership style across most participants. “Transformation leadership refers to the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower,” explained Northouse (2004, p.170). Another central theme was creating an environment that is inclusive and welcoming of the contributions of others. “I believe that I subscribe to an inclusive approach. I try to enlist the support of all of the individuals around me so I can get them on board with me,” explained Participant 5 (J. Martinez, personal communication, March 8, 2007).

### **Question 2: Do you think leaders are born with leadership characteristics, or can employees be trained to become leaders?**

Many of the leaders interviewed believe people are born with innate qualities, talents, and abilities that can be developed to make them successful leaders. It was expressed by the leaders that some people have the natural ability to communicate well and by developing this trait (among others) they can become great communicators. Conversely, people who do not possess this trait can acquire it by learning. However, a combination of trait and training will produce a better communicator than training alone. Participant 8 opined that some people are born leaders, and then there are people who can become leaders. Making reference to Napoleon’s rule that all generals are made in battle, one of the leaders interviewed explicitly stated that people are not born leaders, but believes anyone can be trained to be a leader with the drive and determination.

### **Question 3: What leadership characteristics do you value in your employees?**

Most popular among the responses was initiative, including Participant 11 who tied in initiative with another characteristic of leadership: loyalty. “In terms of initiative, you like to see people who will surprise you; that bring things to the table that you wouldn’t have thought of,” said Participant 11 (M. Gilbert, personal communication, March 11, 2007). This sentiment was shared by Participant 2 who added, “one of the most important leadership characteristics that I value in my employees is ‘use of initiative’. I expect people to know what they are supposed to do, and to go ahead and do it without waiting for someone to push them around,” (D. Nwokorie, personal communication, February 2007). Likewise, Participant 7 believes, “Some managers like to tell you every little detail of what they want and that stifles creativity and doesn’t bring out the creativity in other people that can make you more successful. (M. Gilbert, personal communication, January 30, 2007).

### **Question 4: What challenges do you face in your day-to-day dealings with your employees?**

All participants recognize the importance of communication, as Participant 3 noted: “communication, experience and understanding are all important,” (E. Agrusa, personal communication, February 6, 2007). For Participant 7, a radio talk show host, being open to other

people's ideas is essential: "I hate talking to the choir. For some hosts it's the same old Kool-Aid every day and it gets boring. You have to hear other people and hear other styles," (M. Gilbert, personal communication, January 30, 2007). Participant 8, also a radio host, adds, "I strive to be more open and honest with my listeners, hoping that will resonate, even if they don't agree," (M. Gilbert, personal communication, February 9, 2007). Conversely, the answer from Participant 1 might indicate a lack of problematic lack of communication: "I am far removed from the average employee. I do not have much interface with employees; the organization has a lot of secretaries," (D. Nworie, personal communication, February 2007).

**Question 5: Describe to us your decision-making process. For example, when your staff brings to your attention a problem, how do you go about selecting a solution?**

Each of the interviewed thought leaders acquires additional information as he/she proceeds through their decision making process. Participant 9 explained, "I make sure to gather the facts, listen to all the parties that are involved and weigh all the options." (J. Craig, personal communication, February 2, 2007). Highlighting the importance of understanding the underlying cause of a problem, Participant 5 stated, "When my staff brings a problem to me, I try to look beyond the service to look at the underlying causes of the problem," (J. Martinez, personal communication, March 8, 2007). Participant 1 said, "A problem is an effect, which means there is a cause. I take a first step of finding the cause of the problem and carry out an investigation before deciding on the solution," (D. Nworie, personal communication, February 2007).

**Question 6: What role do you see women playing in leadership and what advantage or disadvantages do women face in leadership positions?**

There is a consensus among the participants that women have leadership abilities commensurate to that of men. One participant believes women are only scratching the surface of their leadership potential. Most of them agreed that women bring a great balance to many areas that men have been missing in the past. Some of the strengths identified as necessary for effective leadership are found more commonly in women who can elevate their stature as leaders. According to Thomas (2004), being a great communicator is an important characteristic of a thought leader. Another advantage of women in leadership is their style of leadership stems from their natural disposition towards collaboration, inclusiveness, caring, and sensitivity, skills men do not exhibit as much.

## CONCLUSION

Brown and Posner (2001) suggest, "leadership is not learned, but rather...it is learning. When we observe a leader at work...we may really be observing...a learning process," (p. 275). To be a leader is to be a learner, and as a thought leader the only way to influence others and to challenge the status quo is through the acquisition of knowledge and sharing it with a larger organization. Senge (1994) argues, "organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization," (p. 4). The learning an organization pursues must "continually expanding its capacity to create its future," (Senge, 1994, p. 14). By implementing generative learning,

“learning that enhances our capacity to create,” (Senge, 1994, p. 14), thought leaders can help ensure successful futures for their followers and longevity for their organizations.

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