



Leading Leaders: Who is Responsible for Leadership?

By Jim Selman



There is a lot of talk in the Public Service about leadership. We say we need it. The question we don't ask, however, is "Who is responsible for leadership?" Moreover, if we stop and reflect, we recognize that leaders don't lead without the

commitment of those who follow, and that uncommitted followers can destroy any leader no matter how talented or sincere. Leadership can be a solution to many problems, but it is a solution *only if* we are committed to a different future and take responsibility as leaders and learn to empower those we follow.

The key to this idea being more than rhetoric is in understanding that responsibility is about how we relate to the circumstances and is *not* a judgment of who is to blame for the circumstances. Responsibility is about ownership of the way things are: it is a state of being-in-the-world. No one can legislate responsibility or any other human quality ... but responsibility can be learned and it can be coached and it can be the foundation for building a culture of leadership in which all of us share in creating the future.

From the point of view suggested in the CCMD course "Coaching for Breakthroughs and Commitment", responsibility is a declaration of "who one is" in a situation. The word literally means 'response-ability' ... the freedom to act. When we take a stand, we bring ourselves forth as committed in a manner that is not subordinate to the circumstances or the conventional wisdom of what is and is

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not possible. For example, if we say “This is my country, my government, my organization, my circumstances and my issues”, then we might also say that “I am responsible” for everything in my environment—not as an admission of wrongdoing or having created the issue, but as a declaration that opens a possibility of choice and action. If we aren’t responsible individually, then there is no possibility beyond continuing to cope with circumstances that are bigger than we are, pray for better times and do what we can to survive.

Whatever the future, we can safely assume that it will be the product of action taken today...right now.

This idea that the future is a product of action seems obvious whether we are speaking of making a date for coffee with a friend, planning an individual’s career or creating change in the Public Service. What is less obvious is that all of us are acting to the best of our ability based on the way we observe our circumstances, and our observations are a function of our historical stories of how the world works and what we believe to be possible. In other words, our actions are normally responses to our explanations and justifications for what has happened in the past. We assume that ‘the system’ is more or less cast in stone and, therefore, we normally commit only to what we think is reasonable and feasible. Actions based on this view, however, will always lead to more of the same based on the past and reinforce the cultural and circumstantial status quo. Perhaps this is what George Bernard Shaw had in mind when he said:

“Reasonable people adapt themselves to the circumstances. Unreasonable people adapt the circumstances to themselves.

Progress (leadership) depends upon unreasonable people.”

What if we were committed to being unreasonable? What if we stopped blaming the system, or the politicians or the media or our workloads for whatever we consider negative in our current situation? What if we transformed the idea of leadership from being a solution to a problem to being an expression of each individual’s responsibility for creating the future? What if our actions were based on our commitment to and responsibility for a future worth having...a vision of service to Canadians through mutual respect, straight talk, full and open cooperation, and a culture in which we value individual differences?

To have these ‘what ifs’ become ‘why nots’ will require we take different actions than we might ordinarily take and challenge some of our most basic assumptions about the nature of our ‘reality’. If we accept the premise that our actions are already correlated to the past, then it follows that to have a different future, we will require action that is a correlate of the future we are committed to creating. Our leaders need to stand for this possibility—not for reasonableness and not for excuses of why it is hard to achieve our dreams in the current circumstances.

Becoming a leader and being responsible begins by accepting that whatever we consider to be ‘real’ is always and only an interpretation.



For example, in a recent speech, the Clerk of the Privy Council challenged all of us to create a workplace that was more ‘open’ to human values and creativity. This can be heard cynically as a reality in which he is merely ‘cheerleading’ or it can be heard as a reality in which he is calling for new forms of expression, new conversations about who we are and new action consistent with what we say we want. The question isn’t what is ‘reality’, it is what interpretation of reality are we committed to and, given that interpretation, what actions are we taking?

Another notion we should challenge is that one needs position, authority or control to have power and to make a difference. In our history, we have seen countless examples of individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Pierre Trudeau or groups like Amnesty International and Greenpeace taking a stand for what they considered to be right. While many might not agree with everything they espoused and sometimes they have had to pay a price, even their lives for what they stood for, **they also shifted the larger conversations and interpretations for the rest of us and created a new reality based on a concern for the well-being of the whole society and future generations.** These acts are always unreasonable: they always go against the prevailing wisdom and even sometimes against common sense. Yet these are the most powerful acts of leadership imaginable: they are acts of individual human beings being responsible for their situation and moving forward from a deep sense of trust for their vision, other human beings and a willingness to risk what is necessary to make a difference.

We can also challenge the idea that leaders are special people with some innate capacity that allows them to become leaders. A more powerful idea is that **leaders are ordinary people who make extraordinary commitments.** In addition, leadership doesn’t happen inside an individual, but in the context of relationships and in the coordination of actions and practices in a community. In this sense, it is a social phenomenon that is as much a product of those who follow as of those who are recognized and acknowledged as leaders.

In conclusion, we should constantly remind ourselves that the future doesn’t happen ‘out there’ and the future isn’t a problem to be solved or a ‘fixed’ reality waiting for us to arrive.

The future is always a possibility, and when it arrives it will always be a function of our individual and collective actions...today.

Whether we are waiting for a great leader, aspiring to being leaders ourselves or simply seeing leadership as missing in our current circumstances, our choice is whether we participate and be responsible for bringing leadership into existence or whether we wait and watch and assume that someone else is responsible. If we choose not to be responsible, then we are powerless and may end up with a future we do not want. On the other hand, if we can be responsible and participate in creating the future then, as Mahatma Gandhi said, we are “being the change we wish to see”.... We are being responsible for leadership and working together to transform our difficult circumstances into the raw material with which to create a future worthy of who we are and what we stand for.