Cowards Need Not Apply

By Ben Baran, Ph.D., Agility Analytics Practice Leader

Much ink hath been spilt on the inspirational nature of leadership. Although such thoughts have merit, I have long wondered if we overemphasize the inspirational aspects of being a leader to the detriment of underemphasizing the perspirational aspects of being a leader.

That is, we like to talk about the glory, the soaring rhetoric, the passion that one person can infuse into situations. We like to idealize—and maybe idolize—people who do those things.

Yet being a leader demands a higher standard of behavior and an attention to detail that can be isolating. It's often unglamorous. When you're leading the charge, you're often at the tip of the spear—sometimes making the most impact, but also frequently encountering the most resistance.

Quite simply, being a leader day in and day out is hard. It's much easier to go with the flow. It's much easier to walk past what should be corrected, to accept work that isn't good enough.
All of us have had those moments. All of us, in some moment or another, have avoided taking responsibility.

In those moments, we weren't leaders.

Being a leader inherently requires you to abandon such behaviors. It requires a sense of courage to be the lone soul who's objecting to the current way of doing things and suggesting a different path.

If you want to truly lead others, cowards need not apply.

That's because having a sense of duty, an obligation to take on a task and see it through to completion is hard. It requires you to, in the words of the final principle listed among the U.S. Navy's Leadership Principles, "Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions."

Sometimes, managers can fall into the trap of thinking they need to be perfect. And for these perfectionists, admitting failure or taking the blame for mistakes can be highly threatening.

If you're like me, you've probably worked for a person like this at one point or another—someone who avoided responsibility and let others take the "hit" when things don't go well.

Some of those people may even have had the audacity to call themselves "leaders."

The principle of "seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions" implies that leadership inherently involves sticking one's neck out a bit, taking some risks by attaching your name and reputation to something in which success isn't guaranteed. It also implies that leadership is about owning your actions, reminding us that it's OK to say "I made a mistake" or "That was my fault."

So if you aspire to be a leader, know that it's going to be hard. There's a reason so few people actually do it.

Also know that if you're trying to lead others, there's often no better way to start than by showing up, raising your hand and saying "I'll do that; I'll get it done."

And if a few more of us did that every day, I think the world would be a better place.

In fact, I'm sure of it.

This post is the final one in a series that I've now completed on the U.S. Navy's Leadership Principles. Here are all 11 of those principles:

1   Know yourself and seek self-improvement (read more)
2   Be technically and tactically proficient (read more)
3   Know your people and look out for their welfare (read more)
4   Keep your people informed (read more)
5   Set the example (read more)
6   Make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished (read more)
7   Train your unit as a team (read more)
8   Make sound and timely decisions (read more)
9   Develop a sense of responsibility among your people (read more)
10 Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities (read more)
11 **Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions**

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