

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The Passion of a Defining Dream

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Recently while doing some research I came across this quote from the American writer Bernard Edmond:

To dream anything that you want to dream. That's the beauty of the human mind. To do anything that you want to do. That is the strength of the human will. To trust yourself to test your limits. That is the courage to succeed.

For the last few days I've been reflecting on this quotation and how it relates to leaders. Two things stand out to me in these words.

First, the quote centers on critical qualities that are mandatory in all great leadership — the imagination to dream of new possibilities, the strength of will to persevere, the confidence to trust yourself, and the courage to test your limits. Second, you can view these words as a blueprint for leadership. That is, the role of leadership is to instill dreams, perseverance, confidence, and courage in others.

Thus, Edmond's quote serves as a great summary of both the personal qualities to be found in a leader and the essential functions of leadership itself. Stellar leadership calls for other personal and interpersonal qualities, of course. But none are more vital than dreams, perseverance, confidence, and courage.

The Defining Dream

Great leaders are known first and foremost for making a difference, for charting a new course. In short, they begin by dreaming. They envision a future which breaks with the past in one or more significant ways.

How leaders come to this defining dream is hardly important. What's important is that they have one. Some leaders come to a new sense of the future through their own imagination. Others seize on a vision that someone else has conceived and articulated. Still others arrive at their dream through collaborative discussion and interaction with colleagues and advisors. But one way or another, great leadership does not flourish without a defining dream.

With truly great leaders, indeed, it's difficult to tell whether they possess the dream, or whether the dream possesses them. When we are possessed by a dream, it engenders passion. And it's this passion that draws others to our dream.

Perseverance

The bolder the dream, the greater the obstacles between the dream and its fulfillment. As obstacles increase, so too must perseverance, the second quality in Edmond's comment.

When you look at the word "perseverance," you can almost see the word "severe" in the middle of it. With perseverance we can hold course, even if storms and cross-currents are severe. Here again the passion of being possessed by a dream is critical. The greater our passion, the greater our determination to succeed. The greater our ability to persevere.

And what is true of leaders is no less true of followers. Their passion for the dream will determine their own willingness to persevere. Thus, the inspirational role of leadership is to translate the leaders passion for the defining dream into passion among those who follow.

This does not mean that the followers will feel as strongly about the dream as the leader does. Some may. But most won't. Still, people do not persevere merely for the sake of persevering. They persevere because they believe in the leader. They believe in the cause. They believe in the defining dream.

When the leader's passion is contagious, people are more likely to draw on that passion themselves. That's why the inspirational function is so vital to leadership. Inspiration is about leaders imparting their passion to others. It's about making their passion contagious. Dispassionate leaders do not inspire passionate followers.

Courage and Self-Confidence

Bold dreams call not only for perseverance. They also compel leader and follower alike to demand something extraordinary of themselves. Edmond speaks of having the trust "to test your limits." And the courage to test your limits, he notes, is a measure of your trust in yourself. Courage, after all, comes from a voice inside that says, "I have what it takes to do this."

Here again inspirational leadership is pivotal. When the dream is bold and demanding, leaders must help followers believe in themselves. In effect, leaders are creating a collective "inner voice" within their followers, a voice that says, "We have what it takes to do this."

This message should be shored up time and again. Even the most inspirational leaders seldom instill as much passion and perseverance in their followers as the leaders have themselves. As a result, when the going gets rough, the courage and perseverance of followers is likely to wane.

When this happens, leaders must fall back on their personal self-confidence — their trust in themselves — to see them through. Few things test a leader's limits more than the challenge of keeping the dream alive when hope is waning among those who follow. In times like these, leaders learn afresh the meaning of the adage, "lonely at the top."

It's tempting, in that loneliness, for leaders to retreat into their own self-doubts and anxieties. True leadership, by contrast, never retreats into its own private world in moments of adversity. Instead, true leadership redoubles its effort to articulate the dream and to help followers believe in themselves. It constantly stokes its own passion and then the passion of others.

A Final Word

I've decided to adopt this statement from Bernard Edmond as a daily checklist to assess how I'm doing, both personally and as a leader. What is my defining dream? Do I feel passionately about the dream? How well am I persevering in pursuit of the dream? Am I willing to test my limits courageously? And as a leader, am I imparting those qualities to those I lead?

Perhaps you're not in a position of leadership. Even so, Edmond's words are a valuable map for your personal development and fulfillment. Your personal dream may not be to effect sweeping change in the world. But we all need a dream that defines us. Your dream may be to become a fantastic father, an exceptional teacher, or a selfless role model. Those dreams are magnificent in their own right. Only when we have such a dream — and when the dream possesses us — will we truly find our way in the world.

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