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Good Leaders Don't Have to Like People – But They Must Love Them

By Adam Meyers
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Three years ago I read this quote by former NFL coach Vince Lombardi: “I don’t necessarily have to like my players and associates but as their leader I must love them. Love is loyalty, love is teamwork, love respects the dignity of the individual. This is the strength of any organization.”

As a leader of a college campus office, this quote had an immediate impact on me. This idea that we do not have to like people as a leader but we have to love them seemed extreme – yet remarkably – elementary.

Since that time I have been intentionally exploring this concept by reading more about servant leadership and what it truly means to lead others, especially at work but also in other contexts.

The concept of leadership seems to be tossed around quite easily in our culture today. But what is real leadership?

As I have explored this notion further, I do know that leadership has nothing to do with the position in the hierarchy. Anyone can be a leader.

Technically, to be a leader means that there are people following you. And in the best outcome, those people choose to follow a leader for whom they are and what they represent as opposed to feeling forced to follow the leader because that is what the organizational structure says to do. Truthfully, we desire to follow people we believe can take us where we want or need to go.

From what I have personally experienced on the receiving end of effective leadership and from what I have read, the best leaders do the following:

- Have positive influence with other people
- Focus on other people and their needs

- Display a positive energy that impacts those around them
- Desire to change their own world or the world at large
- Commit to making a difference
- Live with integrity and aspiration to do the right thing
- Take risks and think beyond constraints
- Seek mutual benefit in all interactions
- Constantly work to become the best version of oneself for the benefit of other people
- Identify their passion and connect all aspects of their life to it.

To me, this is what it means to lead and I believe we should all embrace this desire to lead others. In essence, we should love to lead. And we must lead with love.

We use the word “love” to reference many things in our daily lives and in our culture. We love family, friends, pizza, ice cream, our favorite sports teams and more. But what does it mean to lead with love? It seems that effectively leading with love is more about focusing on the action and the verb of love rather than the feeling of love.

Author James Hunter stated that “Love is the act of extending yourself for others by identifying and meeting their legitimate needs and seeking the greatest good.”

In perhaps one of the most well-known references to love, often read and heard at weddings, is the passage from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7, which states: “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.”

Within all of these possible actions, I believe that one of the best places to begin in leading with love is to exhibit much patience and kindness toward other people (without forgoing accountability and expectations), to always hope for and to see the best in others even in the most challenging of situations, and to seek the greatest good in all that is done.

All of this is easier said than done. It is definitely scary to think about intentionally putting our wants and needs behind the wants and needs of others. But as I have tried to be more purposeful in leading with love in all areas of my life, I have experienced an abundance of energy, peace, joy and fulfillment with life that I never thought to be possible.

Loving others and living for others is tremendously more rewarding than living for myself.

Imagine a world where the default action is patience and kindness (not the common verbal attacks we see on social media, for example), where we recognize strengths in

others more easily than weaknesses, where we offer appropriate grace for one's shortcomings. And where the typical action is to put others before self (what is in it for you or you/us vs. what is in it for me).

How different would our world be if we all chose to live this way?

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