

Let's talk about the importance of leadership

By Kevin McPoyle

Let's talk about leaders.

When George McClellan graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1846, he was



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second in his class. Three years earlier, Ulysses S. Grant graduated without distinction.

Grant is remembered, though, as one of the finest horsemen to ever attend the academy.

While underachieving Grant would go on to lead the Union Army to victory as commanding general during the War Between the States, second-in-his-class McClellan would be relieved of his command following repeated failures to act, assume risk and lean into the process.

Based on this single data point, it would seem an unimpressive academic career paired with expert transportation skills (horsemanship) are key leadership traits. Before we get ahead of ourselves, though, Robert E. Lee, like McClellan, graduated second in his class at West Point. And like Ulysses Grant, he was a brilliant battlefield leader, risk taker and effective encourager.

These three biographies would seem to imply

classroom grades do not determine a person's ability to lead, one way or the other. Let me add Thomas Jefferson remembered George Washington, who also proved himself to be a successful battlefield leader, as "the best horseman of his age." Maybe we should look for expert transportation skills when searching for leaders.

Each one of us is a collection of personal traits. Lee's record of personal behavior at the academy was pristine. Lee's father, another skilled horseman, had proven himself a gifted battlefield leader during the Revolutionary War but would later spend a year in debtor's prison. Grant would occasionally lose the battle of the bottle but persevere through excruciating terminal illness to write the finest presidential memoir to leave a financial legacy for his wife, Julia.

When judging leaders, we tend to concentrate on their character traits. We search for courage, strength, fidelity and bravery. We want our leaders to be men and women of honor. While these personal traits are important to leadership, they do not paint a complete picture.

If we are to believe his biographers, Apple's Steve Jobs was a leader who lacked some admirable character traits. Although he has

been characterized as being occasionally insensitive, vindictive, abusive and narcissistic, he possessed a vision of excellence and was able to lead his team in efforts to realize that vision.

Like Jobs, a good leader must be able to capture hearts and minds. More than the promise of a paycheck or a 401(k) contribution, the leader must convince his or her followers they are engaged in worthwhile, meaningful activity.

Otherwise, these employees will work without spirit or seek it in another workplace.

A sense of the moment can help a person become a leader. When tested by fire, his or her ability to withstand the heat can demonstrate to others a leader has risen among them. Those who aspire to lead should be alert to these opportunities. However, leadership isn't a one-off event. The leader must be prepared each day to make the right decisions and be ready to change course without hesitation should these decisions not deliver the expected results.

Pointing a team in the right direction marks the beginning of every successful campaign. Of course, even to intuit the right direction is the result of careful research and thought. A skilled leader will know where an organization needs to go to succeed.

Gifted leaders will choose the right team members, nurture their growth, help them reach their full potential, reward them for their efforts and delegate meaningful responsibility. It is a symbiotic relationship; the leader cannot succeed without the follower. Mutual respect and consideration by each regarding the challenges facing the other will determine an organization's ability to reach its full potential.

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