

Why should anyone be led by you?

By Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones, HBR, September 2000

Leaders must have followers. But, followers are increasingly difficult to find these days. Inspirational leaders who are able to engage people and increase their commitment to the company's goals share four qualities:

- They selectively show their weaknesses.
- They rely heavily on intuition to gauge the appropriate time and course of their actions.
- They manage employees with tough empathy.
- They reveal their differences.

Reveal your weaknesses: Exposing one's weaknesses establishes trust. If leaders give the impression that they are perfect at everything, there will be no need for anyone to help them in any way. In short, they will not need any followers. In contrast, admitting they are imperfect, underscores a leader's authority. By revealing their weaknesses, leaders tell their followers that they are genuine and approachable. But executives should not expose a weakness that is considered a fatal flaw. It should not be something that is core to their role.

Become a sensor: Great leaders act like sensors. They can understand and make sense of what is going on around them. They can easily understand unexpressed feelings. They can very accurately judge whether a relationship is working or not. They have the ability to pick up information that is not aimed directly at them. But reading silences and picking up on non-verbal cues has its own risks. There is always a danger of misinterpreting the situation. So, sensing capability must be validated with a trusted advisor or a close confidant.

Tough empathy: Tough empathy means giving people what they need, not what they want. Tough empathy balances respect for the individual and the task at hand. Caring leaders have to give selflessly to the people around them, and know when to pull back. Tough empathy is all about caring with detachment. Leaders who show tough empathy are those who really care about something. And because they deeply care about what they are doing, they are likely to communicate with authenticity. Such leaders have a strong following because they care passionately about both the people and the work.

Dare to be different: Inspirational leaders capitalize on what is unique about themselves. Even as they draw followers close to them, they also show that

they are different. Many leaders start off not knowing what their differences are, but eventually come to know about them. By maintaining their separateness, inspirational leaders are not trying to be manipulative. By being a little aloof, they know that their followers will be able to push themselves. But, leaders must be careful about not creating too much distance. Then, they will stop being good sensors and lose their ability to empathize. They may end up losing contact with their followers.

These four qualities cannot be used mechanically. They have to become part of the leader's personality. The key is not to imitate others, but to develop one's own style. Leaders must become increasingly aware of the four qualities, and display them in a way that is most appropriate for their personality. Essentially, the four qualities together help leaders to be authentic, along with the skills to motivate and inspire people.