

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2017*

Article 8

January 2017

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Recommended Citation

Eich, Ritch (2017) "Commentary: On Patience in Leadership," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.101.1178>
Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol10/iss1/8>

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Commentary:

On Patience in Leadership...



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How Do You Spell Leadership? P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E.

In my book, *Truth, Trust + Tenacity: How Ordinary People Become Extraordinary Leaders*, I discuss the characteristics of leadership, some of which include strong communication skills, integrity, attention to detail, the ability to compromise, civility, and respect. Recently, I have discovered another word that describes extraordinary leaders: *patience*.

Patience is often thought of as a weakness when it comes to leadership. Leaders are expected to make split-second decisions, and move on to the next solution if the current one isn't working. Our obsession with quarterly returns and instant gratification prohibits us from taking more heed than risk when making decisions.

If you look at the characteristics of some of the world's greatest leaders, you may notice what I did: purpose, approachability, tolerance, independence, empathy, nurturing nature, confidence, and endurance. It's not a coincidence that these words make up the acronym *patience*. It's also not a coincidence that these traits are found more in female leaders than male leaders. In fact, one study by Zenger Folkman, reported in *Business Insider*, concluded that women are more effective leaders than men.² Part of the reason is that they had to work harder for longer periods of time — in other words, they were patient out of necessity!

Purpose. Patient leaders understand that having a purpose — and sticking to it — is essential if you want meaningful change. No one illustrates this more than Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Merkel has led her country from intolerance to tolerance; she has never wavered from her purpose of ensuring that Germany remains a key player on the world stage, often leading from behind or with very little support. Merkel is steadfast, straight-forward, and not afraid to tell-it-like it is — all qualities of being purposeful. Merkel understands the essence of purpose: "Purpose — not the leader, authority, or power — is what creates and

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² See <http://www.businessinsider.com/study-women-are-better-leaders-2014-1>.

animates a community. It is what makes people willing to do the hard tasks of innovation together and work through the inevitable conflict and tension.”

Approachability. Patient leaders are open-minded and open to change; they understand the value in being accessible. Indra Nooyi, Chairperson and CEO of *PepsiCo*, is known for writing personal notes to employees’ parents — she understands the strength of reaching out to people at a more human and personal level. Approachable leaders take a more human-centric approach to leading — they understand that effective leaders don’t exploit, they encourage. Nooyi understands that being a demagogue doesn’t work, and in fact alienates customers, clients, and employees. *PepsiCo* was open to listening to what their customers wanted, and now offers more healthful products in addition to their tried and true staples.

Tolerance. Patient leaders know that being open-minded often leads to positive long-term solutions. Tolerant leaders understand the benefits of being broad-minded in accomplishing goals; they know that intolerance stunts growth, while tolerance powers it. Getting along isn’t always easy. While most people probably haven’t heard of Hamtramck, Michigan, it has the distinction of having the country’s first majority-Muslim city council.³ Like its neighbor, Detroit, Hamtramck has had its share of problems, not the least of which is dealing with the fear that comes with change. Hamtramck’s mayor, Karen Majewski, recognizes these challenges but knows that by being tolerant and welcoming others, one can effect change in a way that will be mutually beneficial. Majewski acknowledges that learning to be tolerant of others isn’t always easy, and is often uncomfortable, but in the end, we all benefit by taking advantage of individual strengths instead of focusing on individual differences.

Independence. Patient leaders are independent — they are honest and straightforward and in some cases even defiant. Rosa Parks became a symbol of civil rights when she refused to give up her seat to a white bus passenger. Parks was quoted as saying “I was tired of giving in.” Her single act of independence changed history and thrust her into a leadership role she wasn’t expecting (despite her previous activism within the NAACP). Parks’s defiance fueled a movement that eventually led to passage of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, and made her a voice heard around the world. Leadership evolves from all walks of life and from within each of us —it’s not reserved for CEOs or four star generals. Parks continued her fight for equal rights until her death in 2005 at the age of 92.

Empathy. Patient leaders are compassionate and concerned about others. Like approachability, being empathetic isn’t a sign of weakness — it’s a sign of maturity and confidence. No one exemplifies this characteristic better than Mother Theresa. Like Rosa Parks, Mother Theresa was not the stereotypical leader that often comes to mind. She didn’t have an MBA, never served political office, and didn’t have any armed services experience. In fact, many of the most effective leaders in this world do not. Mother Theresa felt a calling to help “the poorest of the poor,” a mission that continues to this day. Starting in 1946 when she first felt her calling, Mother Theresa expanded her reach to include thousands of sisters who helped thousands of destitute citizens of Calcutta. Her efforts included hospices for the

³ Retrieved from <http://www.modeldmedia.com/features/women-leaders-hamtramck-051916.aspx>.

dying as well as those suffering from leprosy – populations which had often been ignored before Mother Theresa’s actions.

Nurturing Nature. Patient leaders know that by encouraging and supporting others, the change that follows can have a significant and positive impact. Sheryl Sandberg, COO of *Facebook*, is an example of someone who knows how to lead and nurture. While clearly ambitious, Sandberg doesn’t railroad over people, instead choosing to be a true team player. She is a passionate advocate of women’s rights – and remains undaunted even as she’s criticized for being part of the “one percent.” Instead of exhibiting the bad behavior that certain presidential candidates and politicians exhibit, Sandberg shows us that by remaining levelheaded and encouraging, you can achieve your goals – and more. She uses her stature and position to help – not hinder – others. Under Sandberg’s tenure, *Facebook* moved from unprofitable to profitable. Even after the untimely death of her husband, she remains undaunted in her pursuit of equality in the workplace for women.

Confidence. Patient leaders are cool and self-assured—without being cocky and conceited. Malala Yousafzai, a 2014 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, exemplified this when she was shot, point-blank, by a would-be assassin. Not only did she not succumb to her injuries, she did not succumb to continued threats—instead, the experience buoyed her. Yousafzai has been unstoppable in her quest to secure educational freedom and equal rights for women around the world. With her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, the Malala Fund promotes the right for all women to receive an education and be treated equally. Instead of giving up, and giving in, her experience gave her the confidence needed to change the world. Malala knows that fundamental change does not happen overnight – but it does happen as long as you have confidence.

Endurance. Patient leaders don’t give up; they understand that real and lasting change goes beyond short-term gains. Patient leaders know what it means to endure and be persistent: the University of Tennessee’s women’s basketball coach, the late Pat Summitt, understood that surveying and thriving would take time and tenacity. While patience isn’t usually a quality granted to Summitt, in fact she exhibited a key trait – endurance. Early in her career, Summitt washed her teams’ clothes, and drove the van that took them to their games. At a time when women’s basketball was in its infancy, she persevered because she wanted her team to succeed. She knew it would take time, but she never wavered from her fortitude. She knew breaking down the barriers of the old boys’ club of college basketball would take endurance. Summitt retired with a record second to none.

Of course, leaders of both sexes have, and do, exhibit these traits, and not all female leaders are patient. But we can all learn an important lesson by studying these leaders, and how they used their fortitude to meet their goals using patience instead of impetuosity.