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Critical Lessons About Leadership from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

— MOSTAFA SAYYADI, SYDNEY, NSW, AUSTRALIA, and MICHAEL J. PROVITERA, MIAMI, FLORIDA, USA

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s brand of authentic leadership was disruptive. Disruptive leaders bring joy, hope, and a positive attitude to their companies and nations, primarily due to their ability to engender greater trust and engagement. More importantly, they are not afraid to challenge the status quo or shake up long-held traditions in order to fulfill their mission or address a noble cause.

Because many societies globally are currently living in commercial and political turmoil, disruptive authentic leadership is critically needed. Dr. King's innovative, groundbreaking leadership style disrupted civil inequity between the white majority and people of color. Nobody before Dr. King even fathomed the oxymoron of peaceful protest. He made white leaders look at their hypocrisy and ultimately agree to begin honoring the constitutional "all men are created equal."

Dr. King epitomized four distinct characteristics that gave him the gift of bridging the racial divide like no leader before him, a gift that ultimately brought greater trust, unity, and engagement to his nation. Likewise, to be a successful disruptive authentic leader in the business environment, leaders must embrace these four leadership characteristics as well. Here we describe how disruptive, authentic leadership involves the development of such leadership characteristics.

People are hungry for this brand of authentic disruptive leadership. We are all witness to the civil unrest within the social landscape as well as the political unrest within multiple governments, perhaps most notably between the Democrats and Republicans of the USA. Yet within the business world, there often exists friction between managers and their direct reports, CEOs and board members, and various departments (e.g., sales and manufacturing). Whether it is within the social, political, or business arena, Dr. King's brand of leadership appears to be both missed and missing today. Otherwise, headlines across the various media would be offering a more positive outlook.

Characteristic 1: Extraordinary Commitment

The first characteristic of disruptive authentic leaders is extraordinary commitment. Dr. King continuously improved himself to motivate his followers more effectively. His "I Have a Dream" speech resonated with people because while so many had heard of goals or objectives, they had not heard a direct reference to dreams. He demonstrated an intense, inner commitment that equipped him with more efficacious human qualities than those shown by his predecessors. Additionally, it was his passion that drove his commitment to raise civil consciousness to a level that touched his listening audience of every ethnicity at a deep emotional level.

Characteristic 2: Permanent Change

Dr. King used his experiences and opportunities to continuously change and transform himself. A clear example of this characteristic of self-development and critique can be seen in King's awareness of, and eventual friendship with, Mahatma Gandhi. His familiarity with Gandhi's teachings formed the basis for a permanent change in King's mindset, leading to a dedication to fight racism and promote peace in the United States of America.

Characteristic 3: Self-Awareness and Emotional Intelligence

Dr. King's high degree of self-awareness cultivated his emotional intelligence. He was one of the first icons to apply the metrics of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) in analyzing myriad situations involving societal scourge to governmental governance to self-critique. He always sought to improve his strengths and eliminate, or at least lessen, his weaknesses. His high level of discernment and continuous self-evaluation helped make him an authentic leader, providing a better understanding of himself and effecting a more comprehensive understanding of others – their feelings, motivations, and life goals.

Dr. King had more respect and value for the beliefs of others. The "I Have a Dream" speech best captures this self-awareness and cultivated in King a broad-based understanding of the white American community without negating their professed value systems. Instead, he focused on portraying a future characterized by a better system of justice and equality which, he believed, were symbiotic in nature and application. This feature of his authentic leadership – effective and all-encompassing communication - is attractive and exciting to every society, impacting persons from every background and race. Ergo, the new confluence of diversity, equity, and inclusion has become ubiquitous in today's business and organizational planning.¹

Characteristic 4: Mission and Vision Orientation

The next feature of Dr. King's authentic leadership relates to his mission and vision orientation. He was able to take a negative, culturally-evasive norm and immediately transform it into a formidable movement. This is manifested in this characteristic of King's authentic leadership: his motivation to fulfill his life's mission. By shepherding in massive societal change objectives, Dr. King mobilized his followers, prompting them to examine themselves and their roles in society: "Every man has value, and value is represented of every man (and woman)."

Dr. King remained with his followers during the most difficult of times and continuously empowered them to resist injustice and overcome obstacles. Dr. King recognized and embraced an important goal when he said, "I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness" and "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." As a modern-day philosopher, he continuously motivated his followers through his communication channels, especially when he declared: "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope" and "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

In Conclusion

We must all embrace the notion that Dr. King is the father of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as nations and countries become more focused on the long-term goals and prioritize

¹ Even Chick-fil-A, Inc., once targeted as espousing mores deemed discriminatory by many, particularly against members of the LGBTQIA+ community, has recently drawn protests from "Anti-Woke" voices in American far-right politics for maintaining a DEI office within its corporate structure.

authenticity in their macro development strategies. Becoming an authentic leader presents a valuable benefit for political leaders. As Nancy Koehn, author, and professor at Harvard University, commented, “It’s what we’re thirsty for now, we are looking for leaders who can help us make a leap of faith and be integral to creating a better world, and to believe this is worthy of doing so, and possible.” Regardless of the political or corporate position to which one ascribes, adoption of authentic leadership characteristics and a commitment to improve one’s emotional intelligence, will inevitably assist in becoming a more successful, long-lasting, and influential politician, or leader, like Martin Luther King, Jr.

About the Authors

Mostafa Sayyadi is an associate fellow at Australian Institute of Management. He works with senior business leaders to effectively develop innovation in companies, and helps companies—from start-ups to the Fortune 100—succeed by improving the effectiveness of their leaders. In recognition of his work with Australian Institute of Management and Australian Human Resources Institute, Mostafa has been awarded the titles, “Associate Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management” and “Senior Professional in Human Resources.” He can be reached at mostafasayyadi1@gmail.com.

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