



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The One Thing

One of Billy Crystal's movies was named "City Slickers". In that movie former cowboy star Jack Palance gave Crystal some succinct advice. He called it the "one thing". Holding up his index finger, he advised Crystal to find the one thing that would change his life. According to Palance, everyone has a different "one thing" that makes a difference.

That raised index finger was recalled in my mind as I was discussing the current quest for a model for leaders in the fire service. One can hardly pick-up any fire service magazine that doesn't contain an announcement about a course of instruction aimed at some aspect of leadership. It's as if everyone is looking for that one thing that turns someone into a leader. It may well be as elusive as looking for the Holy Grail. It's not that we cannot learn about leadership, but it certainly appears that we cannot treat that quest so simplistically as to suggest there is one pattern to success.

And, there is proof of that observation. The best textbook that I have found on the topic is entitled "Handbook of Leadership and Practice". The book edited by Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khuvana is published by the Harvard Business School, 2010. First off, don't expect a rehash of the book in this column... for one thing; the book is over 800 pages long. It is not a Readers Digest book of leadership. To the contrary, I got a headache several times trying to read it. It is not a fun book to read. No pictures, lots of charts and a plethora of bibliographies, in short, overwhelming.

But, at the same time, an excellent code for the topic. As stated earlier, we talk constantly about leadership as if it exists as a trait that is both real and reproducible. This book raises some questions about that. To give you a taste of context of the book, I offer the following "our view, as editor of the volume, is that the current state of scholar research on leadership doesn't allow us to answer these questions with confidence. Indeed, despite leadership being central to the mission and purpose of most institutions of higher education, there is little scholarship and research on leadership in these same schools."

Later in the same text, the editor admits that most of what qualifies as research on leadership emerges from the writings of guru's, consultants, rebels and non-conformists. Sound familiar? I call them dance crazes. Have you read a book entitled "Leadership Skills of ____"? You fill in the name. Someone wrote about Attila the Hun, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln and George Patton. The all got on the best sellers list.

Personally, I have been pursuing this elusive keystone piece of information for over 50 years. And, now I think I know why I haven't found the unifying theory of leadership. There is no such thing.



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Along the way I have observed a lot of people recognized as leaders. I have been impressed by some, disappointed by others and absolutely mystified by some as to how they hold sway over others. Lastly, there was recently editorial in Time Magazine by Editor Richard Stengel. In it he states “There seems to be more books on leadership than there are leaders. And while there is no lack of theories about leadership there is a dearth of great leaders.”¹

So, back to the quest for the one thing. If there is no unifying theory and scholars cannot adequately define it, where does that leave us? Stengel suggests that charisma is overrated and that nothing matches the power of getting things done. He refers to the power of Nelson Mandela as his example of a lifetime of making a difference, but he does not espouse a Mandela theory of leadership. Instead he points to a lifetime of commitment.

As a result of these observations, my answer may not resonate with everyone, but it certainly fits my observation of those who I have seen exert positive influence over a profession. Have you ever heard the cliché that “it takes a village to raise a child”? I have modified that to read “it takes a lifetime to grow a leader”. It is not an event; leadership is a combination of so many variables that it takes a person a great deal of time to accumulate a skill set that works for them and makes them successful in influencing others.

The lesson I take from this is rather simple. To become a leader, you have to have a strong commitment to self-assessment, an affinity for accountability and a desire to engage in lifelong learning to add to any skill set that works for you.

What I mean by self-assessment is a strong sense of self-awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses. The essence of this attitude is a person who knows what they can and cannot do and act accordingly are usually very successful in getting others to follow them. They get things done. As stated earlier, many have written about leadership and there are enough “models” for leadership to create a huge library. If you are like me, they all have some form of wisdom, but none seem to be complete and all encompassing.

Out of all of that my personal favorite goes all the way back to “Sun Tzu” who once advised; “If you go into combat and you don’t know about yourself or the enemy you are in mortal danger. If you know the enemy, but are not aware of our own strengths and weaknesses, you are in still in a precarious place and can be defeated.

If you know the enemy and know yourself you are likely to be a success and survive.

¹ Time magazine, July 20th, 2010.



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Does a person need a degree in leadership to learn that basic lesson? Can we adopt it to any area we wish to influence, now and in the future?

I think we can. You can start tomorrow morning.