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HAVE WE BEEN MISLED?

LEADERSHIP BEYOND CRISIS

Fit no stereotype. Don't chase the latest management fads. The situation dictates which approach best accomplishes the team's mission.

Colin Powell, former secretary of state

Who is your idea of an exceptionally effective leader? Rudy Giuliani? A good choice given his remarkable response to the tragedy and challenges of 9/11? Jack Welch? He certainly worked his magic at GE in the 1990's? Maybe you would mention Lou Gerstner, Jr. for navigating the successful turnaround of the IBM juggernaut? All three have written best-sellers recounting their exploits, successes, and philosophies of leadership. They have been lionized by the media, featured as the subject of numerous articles and interviews, and received abundant praise and recognition for their leadership effectiveness in immensely difficult circumstances.

The perception of these three leaders as heroes exemplifies a broader trend in the business world and the media. Outstanding leadership typically portray as individuals rising heroically to the challenges of extreme crisis situations.

5-D LEADERSHIP

Lessons from leaders like Alexander the Great, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, George W. Bush, Colin Powell, and President Eisenhower are all part of this growing trend. People love a good story filled with drama, obstacles, and triumph. Larger-than-life crisis conquerors certainly fit the bill.

While this makes for fascinating reading and perhaps offers short-term inspiration), it offers little real help to leaders looking for help to real world problem. In fact, stories like these are misleading—for two reasons: first, they ignore the fact that most business leaders do not operate in an environment of extreme crisis; and second, some of these heroes had very unheroic moments.

In an interview with Newsweek magazine James O'Toole, research professor at the Centre for Effective Organizations of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and author of numerous books on leadership, discusses a story he read about Rudy Giuliani:

The point [of the story] was: what the world needs now is leaders, not managers, that business leaders ought to look at Giuliani for the kind of forceful leadership we need. I think that's wrong on many scores. ***Most American businesses are not in a time of crisis.*** There were just a handful of companies affected directly by the World Trade Center attacks. To portray the general business culture as being in a crisis similar to what New York City is going through both underestimates the true kind of trauma and tragedy that happened in New York and grossly overstates the problems in corporations (emphasis ours).¹

Epic tales of leaders as heroic crisis managers don't describe the day-to-day reality of most leaders, and they ignore the fact that these leaders were often floundering prior to the crisis, or subsequently failed as leaders once the crisis passed. What is highly appropriate leadership in a context of crisis is typically ineffective and even destructive in other contexts. Winston Churchill is a vivid example of this phenomenon. Although brilliant as a forceful leader during World War II, he subsequently floundered in a time of peace because he did not adapt his authoritarian approach to the new reality.

It is not surprising that individuals trying to improve their power to lead sometimes look for magic: "the secrets on how to become a great leader," the one true way that works in all situations. They read about servant leadership, strategic leadership, visionary leadership, the leader-as-coach, or the leader-as-commander, and focus on the one dimension of leadership they're comfortable with.

The idea that successful leaders operate in the same way in all circumstances is just not true. In fact, rigidity in one's leadership approach is a fast way to becoming yesterday's leader.

Take a look at three very different leaders: Rudy Giuliani, an instant icon with the perfect style for an indelible moment; President Jimmy Carter, whose

inappropriate crisis management style wildly missed the mark; and Sir Ernest Shackleton, whose flexible adaptive leadership style actually saved the lives of his team.

**THE GIULIANI MOMENT:
9/11 AND THE REMAKING OF A LEADER**

"Tomorrow New York is going to be here. And we're going to rebuild, and we're going to be stronger than we were before...I want the people of New York to be an example to the rest of the country, and the rest of the world, that terrorism can't stop us."

Rudy Giuliani, September 11, 2001

"...for having more faith in us than we had in ourselves, for being brave when required and rude where appropriate and tender without being trite, for not sleeping and not quitting and not shrinking from the pain all around him, Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of the World, is TIME's 2001 Person of the Year."

Nancy Gibbs, *TIME*, December 31, 2001

On the cover of *TIME*, Giuliani's qualifications for the award with the simple phrase, "Tower of Strength." A fitting tribute, Giuliani's response to the tragedy and trauma of the horrendous events and aftermath of September 11, 2001 was remarkable and exactly what the city and the nation needed. With the President being kept out of sight for national security reasons during most of that day, Giuliani's presence and voice gave immediate comfort and inspiration not only to New Yorkers, but also to the rest of the nation. His tireless efforts, demonstrations of courage and compassion, and words of inspiration and consolation continued to sustain us in the weeks that followed.

Given Giuliani's effectiveness in the aftermath of 9/11 it's easy to forget that just prior to that infamous day his reputation and approval rating was at its lowest ebb since becoming Mayor. Such lack of public support contrasted starkly with the results of his 1997 re-election where he garnered 57% of the popular vote, carrying four out of New York City's five boroughs. What was it that got him elected initially in 1993 and re-elected in 1997? And why was his popularity waning towards the end of his second term prior to the terrorist attacks?
