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Constance R. Campbell

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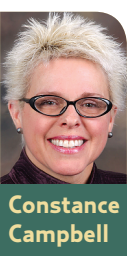
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Leadership: It's all about me — or not

Leadership has many definitions — more than 2,240,000 online.

Many of these definitions, though, share four elements: 1) a leader who exerts influence, 2) followers, 3) a mission and 4) a context.



Constance Campbell

Notice that none of these elements tell us whether leadership is positive or negative.

Churchill qualifies as a leader, but so does Hitler. So what is the distinction between what is often called the light side of leadership and the dark side of leadership?

The four elements of leadership provide a starting point for examining that issue.

Starting with element No. 1, the leader, we find that well-known leaders tend to have a strong sense of self, as illustrated by Churchill and Hitler. But the shape of

their sense of self is where the paths to light and dark diverge.

Light-side leaders have a strong sense of self-acceptance, self-confidence and self-efficacy.

They believe in themselves and their capability to influence followers to accomplish a mission. But their strong sense of self is balanced by a strong commitment to followers and to their mission, coupled with an awareness of the nuances of context.

Light-side leaders have been called “constructive narcissists,” people who have a strong sense of self, but view themselves as part of a larger system, rather than the focus of the system.

In his book “Good to Great,” Jim Collins notes that great leaders display ambition, but it is ambition for their organization (context) rather than for themselves. For these people, leadership is “not all about me.”

Churchill, described by biographer William Man-

chester as a man of strong self-confidence, softened somewhat by his years of political successes and failures, is an example of such a leader.

At the other extreme, the dark side, the focus is almost exclusively on the self. For these leaders, leadership is indeed “all about me.” Followers, mission and context are viewed on the basis of their service to self.

These leaders have been called “destructive narcissists.” Their narcissism leads them to a sense of entitlement, even when others must sacrifice to give the narcissist what he or she wants, but dark-side leaders do not respond to the sacrifices of others as they are not capable of empathy with others.

Dark-side leaders tend to view followers as tools to be used to accomplish the leader's own goals, and their interactions with others are primarily manipulative.

Dark-side leaders tend to view followers as tools to be used to accomplish the leader's own goals, and their interactions with others are primarily manipulative. Like light-side leaders, dark-side leaders believe strongly in their mission. However, it is usually a mission that is self-aggrandizing.

Hitler, as described by biographer Ian Kershaw, fits this description with his strong personal ambitions and reinterpretation of historical events to put himself in a better light in “MeinKampf.”

Thus, light- and dark-side leaders look alike in some ways — a strong sense of self, strong commitment to their mission and an understanding of their context. They

differ in their focus on self.

For organizations that wish to move toward the light side of leadership, this implies a need for careful selection processes. Because it is difficult to judge between self-confidence and self-absorption in an interview setting, organizations may need to employ the services of a psychologist who can help them in this regard.

Organizations must also ensure that their leader development programs include ways to help self-absorbed individuals appreciate the perspective of others, for example by using 360-degree feedback. However, the jury is still out on whether it is possible to move from the dark side to the light side.

What do you think? Do you know a light-side or dark-side leader? Does this description fit?

Constance Campbell is a professor of management at Georgia Southern University. She can be contacted at ccampbell@georgia-southern.edu.



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