

Are You a Leader, or Just Pretending to Be One?

By: Umair Haque. As published in the Harvard Business Review - February 03, 2016

We've rarely needed leaders more — but wanted the leaders we have less.

It's as if we've forgotten what leadership really is, and confused it with what it isn't.

What's not leadership? For one thing, performing. Leadership is not making the right faces, memorizing the right lines, pumping your fist in precisely the right way at exactly the right moment. It's *being*. Let me explain the difference. What happens, for example, when the situation goes off script, or when the audience heckles, or when the walls of the theater begin to collapse? The actor, if he cannot improvise, is left paralyzed. Yet that is what we see today: leader after leader left paralyzed by the unexpected turmoil of an uneasy age in an uncertain world, whether those leaders are political, social, cultural, or corporate. So we study the scripts, memorize the lines, carefully examine the angle of our fist pumps.

I'll give you a simple example. No one would have predicted just a decade ago that Nokia would be something like a distant memory of a household name. Yet while its decline was happening, Nokia's leaders, though they were *acting* like leaders — reassuring, confident, calm, giving fine speeches — were not *being* leaders. They weren't doing the things they had to do to set their company up for the future, things that, precisely because the future is uncertain, sometimes make you look hesitant, or fumbling, or foolish.

Nor is leadership performing in that other sense, the sense of being “a high performer.” And yet too often we look for leaders among the profit maximizers and goal attainers. But a leader's fundamental role isn't merely to perform the same tasks as yesterday, just more efficiently; it is to *redefine* the idea of performance entirely. Consider: Pierre Omidyar, founder of Ebay, probably wouldn't have made a great Sotheby's auctioneer. Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia, probably would have sucked as CEO of Encyclopedia Britannica. Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, probably wouldn't have been a great classifieds editor.

If our goal is discovering and cultivating leaders like that, then we aren't likely to find them among our best performers, but among those who are challenging our ideas of what performance *can* be. And if we only promote the “high achievers” to leadership, should we be all that surprised when we just get more of the same?

Nor are leaders merely politicians, human calculators of advantage whose main goal is to attain, and then maintain, power. But the job of leaders is not taking power, but the opposite: *empowering*. The job of a leader is create a reality in which performance itself stops being merely a performance — to focus people on the meaning and mission of their work, not on the politics of flattering and threatening, cajoling and conquering.

When leaders empower people through a higher purpose, they don't have to “create buy-in” or use other marketing tactics to win over their followers. Leaders who do find themselves acting something like a pusher — resorting to perks, tit-for-tats, and bonuses — might want to ask themselves if they're missing some larger point. A leader isn't a salesman. When Steve Jobs asked John Sculley his famous question, “Do you really want to spend your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?” he was making just such a

distinction. *Selling* sugared water might make you a few bucks — but only at the cost of *doing something that matters*. The purpose of a leader is to create a purpose.

And yet although that sounds very inspiring, a leader's job still is not to give inspiring speeches. A leader isn't an orator who claps everyone on the back once in a while when they've sunk into a torpor. The job of a leader *is* indeed to inspire people — but in the *truer* sense of the word: from the Latin *inspirare*, inspire, to breathe or blow into. Leaders breathe life into the organizations they lead, into the people they're responsible for. They breathe life into possibilities. They make it more possible for the rest of us to dare, imagine, create, and build. They do not merely encourage us to do so; theirs is the hard work of crafting all the incentives, processes, systems, and roles that actually empower us to do so.

Leadership is in an uncertain place. We long desperately for better leaders. But perhaps it is precisely our longing that's the problem. We're waiting for a rescue at the cost of our own redemption. Because it's easier to complain about the leaders we have than to try to do better. After all, it's a pretty hard job.