

OUR FUTURE HINGES ON THE LEADERS WE FOLLOW

Sarah McArthur

Sitting down in mid-January to write this column for our upcoming Spring 2025 issue of *Leader to Leader*, I am torn in focus thinking of those who live in Los Angeles, California, and have lost so much due to the unprecedented fires that have engulfed the area. As a third-generation Southern Californian living across the country in Eastern Pennsylvania, I am deeply saddened and finding it difficult to gather my thoughts to concentrate on the topic I want to delve into for this issue, which is the leaders we choose. And it is at times like these, which seem to happen more and more frequently nowadays, that the value of and need for us to choose the “right” leaders is ever more apparent and critical to our global functioning society and the future of humanity.

There are many definitions of “leader.” At the most basic level, there is Peter Drucker’s definition, found in his 1996 *Christianity Today/Leadership Journal* essay, “Your Leadership Is Unique.” In it, Peter wrote that “The only definition of a *leader* is someone who has *followers*. Some people are thinkers. Some are prophets. Both roles are important and badly needed. But without followers, there can be no leaders.”

This definition makes footballers Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi with 647 million and 505 million followers respectively and singer, actress Selena Gomez with 422 million followers, reality TV star Kylie Jenner and actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson both with 395 million followers, the top five most influential leaders in the world, at least on

Instagram. Likely these are not the type of “followers” that Drucker was envisioning, but they are followers just the same, and it is important to note that according to Drucker’s definition, these Instagram celebrities are in fact leaders in this relatively new era we call the Digital Age.

The Digital Age, also known as the Information Age or Computer Age, is characterized by worldwide digital communication. It has caused massive change in every area of our global society, beginning in the 1980s and really ramping up in the last couple of decades. For instance, impossible previously, today we can use digital technologies, like the internet and artificial intelligence, to communicate with each other around the globe. As a result, our cultures are changing because we are relating experiences and sharing ideas, likes, and dislikes with people with whom we previously could not and thus influencing each other as never before.

In this Digital Age, our global economy is being significantly affected by digital technologies, resulting in, for instance, new business models, like Uber and Amazon. Today, we have new terms to describe these social and economic changes, like: *unicorn*, a privately owned startup valued at over \$1B US dollars; *Google*, a proper name that has become a verb meaning to search the internet; *ghosting*, which means to abruptly end all contact with a person without explanation and to ignore further attempts at communication; and *global boiling*, which refers to the growth of extreme heat events like the LA fires of early 2025.

There is so much happening during this age that cannot be described in a short column. Suffice to say, we are in the midst of incredible global change on a massive and pervasive scale. So, while Peter’s is a literal and satisfactory definition of the word leader, it is not sufficient when we are choosing who to follow and trust with the direction of our wellbeing, our lives and communities, and our world amidst such change.

How, then, do we identify and support leaders who will lead our organizations, our government, our schools, our militaries for the greater good of all of us? At a time when there are such vastly differing views and perspectives on just exactly what is good for all of

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us, when there are a variety of visions, strategies, plans, and goals that not only do not align, but are in fact in direct opposition to each other, this can be a challenge.

We must start with character, with who the leader is and who they portray themselves to be. Do their espoused beliefs and values align with their behavior? And, very importantly, are we aligned with their beliefs and values, and do we advocate their behavior? This is so important, because we know, it is the leader’s character that will determine the performance and results of their leadership.

Next, we look at their vision for the organization, the community, the country, our world. Does the leader have a vision, strategy, and plan that includes all of us? What is their espoused vision of our collective “Bright Future”? What is their strategy to get there? And, finally, what is the plan? This takes studying to learn as much as possible about the leader, and when in the throes of such massive change, this is a very important responsibility for each and every follower.

And, finally, it is so often the case that while a great leader is leading an organization, the organization succeeds, yet, after they leave their successor is far less successful. One of the biggest and sometimes ignored challenges for the leader is to leave the organization well. This means they leave the organization in a position to continue to succeed and they have a successor in place who can lead that continued success. Such leaders are

creative, constructive individuals who find satisfaction in the success and wellbeing of their organizations, those within them and those they serve, and in developing and preparing for the future of their organizations. Their exceptional performance is rooted in their motivation to develop those around them, and their focus is less about creating and enlisting more followers and more about creating more leaders for our organizations, our communities, and our countries of tomorrow.

As we begin the second quarter of this century, let us look to our leaders and ask ourselves “Why should I follow you?” And in answering this question, let us consider very carefully their character, their vision, and their plan for our future as we choose who earns our support in this very critical time in history.

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