

Understand the dark side of leadership

These days, it is common for people to attend leadership institutes, programs and seminars to refine their skills. They take courses and read books, and many of these leadership books land on the best-seller list. One might ask: With all of this preparation, why are there so many bad leaders?

One of the most common themes of leadership is that it begins with self-knowledge and insight, and the emphasis is on understanding one's strengths and abilities. Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, in their book "Now, Discover Your Strengths," say it is more important to understand one's strengths than to improve one's weaknesses. Though this might be true, some of the very strengths that enabled leaders to be successful can become liabilities if not kept in balance. The dark side of leadership can take over if the person is unaware of the negative effect of their ego, and it can become a "shadow."

Parker Palmer explains the shadow in his book "Let Your Life Speak": "A leader is someone with the power to project either shadow or light onto some part of the world and onto the lives of the people who dwell there. A

leader shapes the ethos in which others must live, an ethos as light-filled as heaven or as shadowy as hell. A good leader is intensely aware of the interplay of inner shadow and light, lest the act of leadership do more harm than good."

It is important to understand that strengths applied to an extreme can become a shadow that manifests itself in bad leadership behavior such as greed, defensiveness, micromanaging and increased bureaucracy. In "Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters," Barbara Kellerman makes recommendations for minimizing bad leadership behavior:

Share power: Working alone increases the chance leaders will lose touch with reality and abuse the power they have earned.

Don't believe your own hype: When we hear something repeatedly, we tend to believe it, whether it is true or not.

Compensate for weakness: Leaders should be willing to admit what they can't do or don't know and find people who can and do.

Get authentic: Healthy skepticism either from the leader or advisers goes a long way toward keeping leaders grounded.



Jann
Freed

Stay balanced: Leaders need to live a holistic and healthy life in order to make thoughtful and effective decisions.

Be reflective: Self-insight requires continual reflection in order to learn and not repeat the same mistakes.

In addition, leaders who adhere to continuous-improvement principles know how to keep the dark side from taking over. Some key steps include:

Create an environment where people feel safe expressing dissenting opinions.

Collect regular feedback and be open to listening to the input for improvement.

Focus on removing obstacles for people and avoid being the obstacle.

Though it is easier to focus on the positive aspects of leadership development, it is essential for leaders to understand their shadow side so they do not become bad leaders. In order for this to happen, leaders need to realize that the process starts with being committed to continuously learning, growing and becoming the kind of leader others will follow. In assessing one's leadership ability, a good question to ask is: Would you follow yourself? □

Jann Freed holds the Mark and Kay De Cook Endowed Chair in Leadership and Character Development at Central College in Pella.