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Great Leadership is Emotional
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Conjure up an image of a great leader, a leader who was successfully able to navigate an organization through difficult time or through significant change. Then think of words that describe that leader. Perhaps you would use words like visionary, or courageous, or inspirational, or maybe you would choose words like strategic, or ingenious, or great with people. Those words likely describe those whom we would describe as great leaders. Today, however, I am going to suggest to you another term I believe also describes a healthy and impactful leader. It is the word emotional. Most often when we attach the word emotional to a person we do not do so in a particularly positive light and so it seems a bit odd to attach the word emotional to great leadership. But when I say great leadership is emotional I am not saying that a leader cries and yells and pouts, what I am saying is that great leadership has a massive emotional component to it. With that said, I want to share with you a number of reasons why great leadership is emotional.

First, great leadership is emotional because it calls for a leader to endure the pain of others so that they can grow in responsibility. Take for example a parent's leadership of a child. If the parent has a very low threshold for seeing their child endure struggle and pain, it is very unlikely that the child will become personally responsible for certain tasks or master them. If a parent always takes the child the lunch forgotten at home because the parent cannot bear the thought of the child going hungry, then the child will not learn the responsibility of remembering their own lunch. If a parent cannot bear the thought of a child struggling to get a project done for school, then the parent will rescue the child by doing some of it himself or calling for the teacher to lessen the requirements. What is important to see with this point is that if leaders want to see others grow in responsibility they must be willing to deal with their own emotional need to rescue others. Always rescue a spouse, always rescue a co-worker, always rescue a client because you cannot stand to see them in pain and you will fall short of great leadership.

Second, great leadership is emotional because it asks for leaders to show the emotions their team needs to see. This can go in all kinds of directions. At times, a team needs to see a sense of strength and resolve. George W. Bush saw his highest presidential ratings after he gave a rousing speech on the rubble of the Twin Towers. At other times, leadership calls for compassion. When an employee is lost to an accident; a great leader is not disinterested, but understands the loss to family and colleagues and let's others see his own sense of loss. Still at other times a great leader must be willing to show his or her anger. Those under the watch need to see their leader standing up for what is not right, whether it be office backbiting or the work ethic of those who are ruining company morale. Recently I read about a leader who did not like conflict but finally got the nerve to say, "I'm angry that I had to spend three hours dealing with a problem that you created — a problem that you should have handled. Don't put me in that position again."¹ In the past to avoid conflict this leader would have just rolled up her sleeves and handled the problem herself, but she realized that kind of leadership was not working. So she showed the partner the emotions that needed to be seen and the problem went away.

Third, leadership is emotional because the less confidence a leader has in his or her emotional stamina in the face of resistance, the less likely he or she will make a decision. When we think of great leaders we think of those who have led people through difficult times or to great heights. Often these leaders have had to make a decision and then are called such things as cruel and heartless, foolish or self-interested. Most leaders know in advance the unpopularity of certain decisions, and if they know they cannot stand in the midst of such pushback, they will not make the decisions in the first place. Ask a group of people if they think a great leader is one who is afraid to make decisions that are unpopular, and I don't think you will get one answer in the affirmative.

Fourth, leadership is emotional because when things are going well there is a temptation to grow faster than can be done with excellence. When an organization grows beyond its ability to fill its key seats with the right people, when it takes on markets in which it is not distinctive from its competitors, when it moves away from its core values, and when it neglects its core competencies for new adventures,² all because

stockholders and market analysts clamor for more and more success, it has set itself up for a fall. Research has shown that companies that maintain a pace that does not sacrifice their distinctives, and competencies, and values do much better in the long run than those that chase after more now. But this requires the emotional discipline of a leader who does not overstretch in the face of success. This might sound easy, but consider if your company has grown 30% a year for the last three year, and a new market opens up and the gurus are telling you that to keep up growth you have to jump into it. Do you listen to the gurus or do you examine whether the move is truly right for your company? The same leader who might have the emotional stamina to endure criticism may find their greatness tarnished when they cannot resist the emotional charge to climb a hill that this time should not be climbed.

Fifth, great leadership is emotional because the information we are called to make decisions upon is almost always laced with emotion. Consider almost any news or information source. Rarely are facts and figures given without commentary, and it seems that 9 times out of 10 that commentary has an anxious tone to it. The market is about to tank, the market is about to crash. Peace is just around the corner, a nuclear holocaust is upon us. The teenagers of today are narcissistic underachievers; the teenagers of today will change the world. Crime is at historic lows; the latest crime reports means you must have a gun. The church has too much power in the United States; the church is irrelevant in the United States. Whether the reports are about the latest FED moves, your favorite sports team, or the market value of your home, information today is laden with emotion. And great leaders must sort out facts from fear, data from anxiety or jubilation. In fact, in most cases great leaders cut themselves off from information flow for periods of time, so that they can sort through what is really important. They have to shut out the news and the internet and the latest forecast at least for certain hours during their week and certain days during their year. This is not easy when the emotionally-laden information flow says if we unplug even for a moment we do so at our own peril.

Sixth, great leadership is emotional because there is rarely a way out of a chronically bad situation without being willing to go through a temporarily more painful season.³ This is true when we are talking about fixing a long underfunded Social Security system, changing our own personal health or financial condition, addressing a toxic family member, confronting vicious terror groups, or shutting down unprofitable business units. In nearly every case when problems that have existed for a long time are finally addressed there will be a time of temporary acute pain that is felt sometimes by individuals and sometimes by an entire organization or nation. And until a leader is willing to lead through that temporary pain, the source of the problems will remain and floundering will continue.

Pick a leader then, any great leader, from history or modern times, from business to politics to academia to the pages of Scripture. They may have come to the table with certain skills or intellectual capabilities that no doubt lent to their success. But I would venture to say that those capabilities were really the secret of their success. Their success stemmed from their ability to lead in the midst of the emotions inherent to leadership, because great leadership is emotional.

¹ Doug Sundheim, "[Good Leaders Get Emotional](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, August 15, 2013.

² Jim Collins, "[How the Mighty Fall: A Primer on the Warning Signs](#)," *Business Week*, May 2009.

³ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Seabury Books, 2007), 202.