

IS LEADING YOUR CALLING? BY RICHARD LEIDER

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The essential leadership question is not “What do you want to be when you grow up?” It is the more demanding “What is your calling?” As we lead with this question in mind, we not only uncover the joy that every follower seeks, we help affirm our life’s work, our contribution to the world. Whether we ask this question during adolescence, during midlife, or in elderhood, it is the big question, and, it is *the* question we must continue to ask and answer ourselves because what shapes and directs our leadership more than anything else is the questions we ask, fail to ask, or never dream of asking ourselves. It is our own questions that guide the paths our followers ultimately travel.

Most of the true callings I have studied take their shape through questions and actions that are natural by-products of ordinary living, not special things we do for “spiritual development.” Heeding life’s calling is a core thread of living a life, not a process with a life of its own. By following the inner voices that call to us to try this and to go there, we discover the path that we clarify, in hindsight, as our calling.

What Is Our Seed of Destiny?

Seasoned leaders help people heed their life callings. They help them uncover their DNA –

their embedded destiny. Great leaders help people see beyond what they are today to what they can become tomorrow.

“Always the beautiful answer. Who asks a more beautiful question?” asked the poet e.e. cummings. Great leaders know to ask the more beautiful question to open their followers’ minds and spirits to their larger potentialities. And their questions always exceed their answers. The very best can intuitively sense the potential of people and help them tap into it.

There is a raw self within each of us, too, that is our seed of destiny. Like acorns, we are oaks-in-waiting, raw potential waiting to find our calling. At the core of our destiny lies the necessity of choice, the potential to choose to become something that has never existed before. When we fail to express our embedded gifts, we starve our seed of destiny. We fail to give our authentic, God-given gifts. A calling is the inner urge to give our gifts away. Calling gives us the sense that we are evolving according to a larger design – a realization that makes our lives feel purposeful.

Old Answers Make Us Restless

Heeding our calling means giving our gifts, naturally, to make distinct contributions to the

world. *Heeding* comes from listening to and accepting our raw self, our individual gifts and private yearnings. *Heeding* means asking uneasy questions. It means not resting easy with easy answers. Carl Jung pointed out that a person in the middle years without a larger purpose was destined to be neurotic. The question, “what is my calling?” awakens us, eventually, beyond the missing answers of our upbringing and culture. We find that old answers make us restless. They bind us to lives of repeated or secondhand experience. We feel like we’re dying from the inside out. We feel like we’re sleepwalking through our lives. It is important to understand that calling is not only a destiny issue, it is a wellness issue. To feel whole we need to feel healthy from the inside out. An inability to integrate our inner life with our outer life can be a source of considerable pain, anxiety, and disease. Developing as a human being means being integrated from the inside out. It means, for example, that our leadership is a true expression in the outer world of who we are in the inner world. When our leadership voice is constricted, we become diseased. When we have a true leadership voice, blood flows and energy is released. We feel vital.

The Language of Leading

There are millions of vocationally joyless people in the world who are deaf to the voice that is trying to awaken them. They think they want easy answers. But in truth, they want the liberation that comes from living in the big questions. When leaders dare to ask the big questions of themselves and others, they sweep away deadening platitudes.

Questions are the language of leading. We must become comfortable living in complex, ambiguous, and mysterious questions. As Rainer Maria Rilke observed, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Live the questions now.” The late scientist Jonas Salk described his calling to Bill Moyers as “finding the logic in the magic.”

We must find the logic in the magic. To do so, we must “try to love the questions themselves.” That’s very difficult in a society that’s crazy for answers.

The Sacred Bridge

We sit on a privileged and sacred bridge between the inner life of our followers and the outer life known as the real world. We know from our vantage point that “heeding the call” is at the heart of the struggle for many to cross the bridge.

To lead other across the sacred bridge, we must cross it ourselves. Heeding our own calling is the first essential step to bringing out callings in others. We’re only as good at helping others live in their questions as we are at living in our own. When it comes to leading, as in many areas of life, we end up asking others the questions we’re asking ourselves. It occurs naturally as part of the leading process.

Are You a Searcher?

The media have been devoting a lot of attention lately to why so many people are asking the calling question. The questioners are labeled “cultural creatives” or “early adapters” to societal trends. But the media are wrong, I’m convinced. The search for callings is not a trend. It is something much deeper. If it needs a label, it is *searcher*. James Kavanaugh captured the essence of the drive when he wrote, “I am one of the searchers. There are, I believe, millions of us. We are not unhappy, but neither are we really content. We continue to explore life, hoping to uncover its ultimate secret.”

We humans are searchers for meaning. Life has some meaning because there is some good in it. The most meaningful lives are ones in which we directly serve others or create products that make life better for others. Work has meaning if it serves others. Calling joins self and service. As Aristotle said, “Where our talents and the needs of the world cross, there lies our vocation.”

Aristotle's definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world.

Several months ago, while climbing up the steep Ol Donyo Lengia, the "Mountain of God" in Tanzania, with several searchers, the question inevitably arose, "Why are we doing this?" Late that morning, while exploring the cones in the 10,000-foot active volcano, and staring at the mountain shadow cast by the rising sun, we came up with another way to frame the question: "Why wouldn't we do this?"

That was an interesting question, given that we felt half-dead from waking up at midnight and groping upward all night in darkness. It was clear. We were searchers. And the mountain posed its own questions for each of us.

We were searching, not climbing. We were a community of searchers, each absorbed in our own questions. Reaching the summit after ten straight hours of slogging was less dramatic than living in the questions that the mountain posed to each of us.

The Leadership Calling

Behind the leadership skills we all seek lies a deeper question. What is our professional identity? Who are we? Who shall we be? Leaders live today in the engulfing world of the marketplace. You might consider hiring a coach to help you discern whether leading is your calling.

Is Leading Your Calling?

Is leading your calling? When did you sense the call to lead? When did you fully commit to leading as your livelihood? By asking these questions, we remind ourselves that leadership work is a blessing, a gift, and a mystery. We must continually remind ourselves that our lives and our partners' and followers' lives are not problems to be solved. They are callings to be answered, mysteries to be lived. Whether called to leadership by God, by economic necessity, or by

circumstance, the key to answering the call is to address the question of who *before* the question of what. This means identifying with the deepest, most central part of ourselves – our highest life calling.

Leading is a learned art. The tasks of leading call for the mindset of the artist. Great leadership requires openness and responsiveness to the specifics of a follower's calling that rise to an art.

Before you finish this paragraph, you have the power to change everything that's to come. And you can do that by asking yourself the one question that every leader needs to ask today: "Is leading my calling?"