

# Leadership

N. Sartorius MD PhD

President, Association for the Improvement of Mental Health Programmes, Geneva, Switzerland

Leadership is a term that is used for many purposes. Its definition varies from one person to another and from one point in time to another. It is a relatively new term: although leaders have existed ever since humans began to migrate out of Africa, the definition of leadership as a set of personality traits that make it probable that people will follow the person who has such traits, almost regardless of the direction that the leader takes, is of a much more recent origin.

Among the features likely to characterise most leaders are self-confidence (i.e. behaviour that gives the impression that the leader knows where to go and how best to get there), determination in the pursuance of goals, willingness to make personal sacrifices in order to make progress, and endurance and energy that are superior to those of the other members of the group. Not all these traits are present in all leaders – indeed, sometimes only one is sufficient.

The notion that leaders are necessary to progress has led to a variety of efforts to create leaders, usually without much success. There is a huge literature on leadership qualities and many highly commercialised agencies provide training that – they promise – will make the participants become leaders.

While it is probably unrealistic to expect that leaders can be created, it is certainly true that those who have leadership potential can be equipped with skills that will make them more effective once they take a leadership position. Most of these skills will also be useful for those who are not leaders, nor want to become one.

A first group of skills that can make leadership more effective and easier are communication skills. These include the skill of listening to others and understanding what they are saying or want to say; the skill of presenting one's plans or goals in a way that will make others want to participate in them or share them; and the skill of limiting to digestible quantities the amount of information being offered to others. Some people seem to have been born good communicators; the majority, however, have to be taught communication skills, which can be acquired in a relatively short time.

The second group of skills concerns the discovery of those who are likely to share the vision and to participate in the venture that the leader wishes to undertake. It is rarely possible and usually not necessary to have all members of a group become enthusiastic about a particular goal or plan: convincing a small proportion of the group to follow the leader's ideas is usually sufficient. Penfield, a social scientist in Canada, once analysed voting behaviour and established that, in groups of people who are not committed to any particular line of action, it usually suffices to have on one's side the square root of the total number of those who need to accept a proposal. Thus, to move a group of 100 people in a particular direction, it is sufficient to have 10

who believe in the proposal made by the leader. The corollary of this rule is, of course, that the proportion of people whom a leader should convince in order to move the mass in a particular direction will diminish with the growth of the group as a whole. Thus, to convince 25 people, the leader has to convince 5 – or 20% – to become fervent followers; to lead one million people, the leader has to be certain of having 1000 people on side – or only 0.1% of the total. This rule explains how it is possible for leaders to get very large groups of people to accept their proposals while relying on a relatively small group of firmly committed followers.

The third group of skills concerns the timing of a leader's action. This is probably the most difficult skill to acquire because it depends on several other skills that need to be developed – such as the ability to simultaneously assess (several) trends of behaviour in a particular group of people and to interpret these assessments in the context of the leader's plans and of the broader environment that might influence the members of the group that is to be steered in a particular direction.

In addition to having skills, there are other characteristics of leaders that are important but that usually cannot be gained through training. These include behaviour shaped in early childhood, personal experience, physical and mental stamina, cognitive capacity and the ability to handle competing demands on time. These characteristics cannot be changed much by leadership courses, which, however, can help students to recognise themselves better, that is, to know both their strengths and their weaknesses in relation to leadership.

Providing knowledge about the area in which the leaders are to work – which is so often the central part of so-called leadership courses – is of little value in leadership development, regardless of how useful the knowledge gained may be to a leader. Further, adding knowledge will have only a minimal effect on shaping the value system of the students of leadership. An important shortcoming of many leadership courses providing knowledge is that the avalanche of information they cover does not leave enough time to study the value system of future leaders and to shape it in a manner that will ensure that leadership skills are used in fulfilling socially useful tasks.

Leadership training that focuses on the acquisition of skills and on shaping values can be immensely helpful to students and to society. It should be a routine part of the postgraduate training of mental health professionals. Not all of those trained will become leaders, but those who have leadership potential will be much better able to lead and to achieve the goals they have set. For those who do not become leaders, the skills which they were taught will still be useful, not least because they will be better able to judge whom to follow.