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On Effective Leadership

MANY HAVE PONDERED WHY SOME NATIONS ARE MUCH MORE SUCCESSFUL THAN OTHERS. IS THE central factor an abundance of natural resources, wise traditional systems of governance, or the absence of serious conflicts? Or does a nation thrive merely as the result of a series of historical accidents? I believe that a primary determinant of success, often neglected, is how the leaders of its major institutions,* governmental and nongovernmental, are selected; how they in turn choose their deputies; and under what incentives they must operate.

The incentives part is perhaps the easiest to describe. To achieve anything of great importance takes time, but in an increasingly rapid-paced world of quarterly reports and sound bites, leaders often become hamstrung by short-term goals. And in large public organizations such as government agencies, leaders need to resist the inevitable pressures from employees to expand the responsibilities and budget of their particular division, even when other parts of the government (or society) are more qualified to meet a goal.

A core assumption here is that the leaders are qualified to lead. In a merit-based society, the selection of the most qualified person for each position of responsibility, independent of personal connections, background, sex, or age, has the obvious advantage of placing critical decision-making into capable hands. Much less obvious is the confounding fact that outstanding “A” individuals commonly have the self-confidence and discrimination needed to hire A, and whenever possible, A-plus, deputies below them. Conversely, when a poorly qualified person is selected as a leader, the opposite occurs. Feeling insecure, such B individuals will hire only B-minus or C deputies, giving rise to a propagating chain of mediocrity that degrades the entire institution.

When serving as president of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS), I befriended a very wise NAS Foreign Associate from Nigeria, Dr. Akin Mabogunje, who wrote an autobiography on the occasion of his 80th birthday.† In the final chapter, he describes the deplorable situation in his country created by “ascriptive rights”: rights that “just depend on being able to assert that one belongs to a group or part of the country to be able to lay claim to positions of authority or power.” As he starkly states: “The first consequence of putting unqualified individuals in important positions is their failure to grasp the nature of the opportunity being given to them to excel. Lacking the requisite mental capacity to cope with the challenges of the leadership position, they invariably turn their attention inward to weed out those whose presence reminds them of their own inadequacies. The mission of the institutions is thus lost in the pervasive fear of victimization for diligence. Any attempt at pursuing excellence at work is seen as a way of showing off the weakness of management and is punished rather than rewarded. In no time, the institution is manned by individuals who are willing to kowtow to the whims and caprices of the so-called managers or heads.”

I have seen the tragic consequences of the situation Mabogunje describes repeated over and over in nations around the world, from important U.S. institutions such as large school districts to international organizations associated with the United Nations. But I have also witnessed the opposite: the flourishing of institutions in which the deputies outshine the boss. This is why my advice to managers is to aim at hiring people who, at least in some respects, appear to be more talented than you are. This requires honest humility. But only in this way can a leader hope to achieve his or her goals.

It is only through a meritocracy in which leaders encourage creativity from outstanding subordinates and are primarily rewarded for long-term, rather than short-term achievements that a nation—and the world—can expect to meet the many challenges that lie before us.

– Bruce Alberts

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*B. Alberts, *Science* 338, 443 (2012). †A. L. Mabogunje, *A Measure of Grace* (BookBuilders, Ibadan, Nigeria, 2011).

