



Penn State Great Valley professor says character is critical for leadership success

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Malvern, Pa. -- Charismatic leadership -- including the power to exert strong influence on others -- has been studied extensively, but a Penn State Great Valley researcher says there has been little attention paid to authentic leadership, particularly the substance of leadership, including values, virtues and character strengths, that are at the core of truly great authentic leaders.

"When developing a course for the master of leadership development program at Penn State Great Valley graduate school, I found that the media tended to focus a great deal on charisma, but I could not find much on the virtues and character strengths as applied to authentic leaders," said John J. Sosik, professor of management and organization, and author of a new book, "Leading with Character: Stories of Valor and Virtue and the Principles They Teach."

"Right now, with all the attention paid to Enron and other phoniness in business, people need to know what the authentic leader stands for in terms of his or her virtues and character. When what you say is what you do and you're true to yourself, then you are an authentic leader."

Sosik took a novel approach to illustrate 23 principles of leading with character strengths and virtues, using well-known individuals who personify each. Some are obvious -- the courage of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, the humanity of Princess Diana, the patience and commitment of Nelson Mandela. Others are subtle and not the expected leadership types -- TV's Andy Griffith, poet Maya Angelou and NFL star-turned-Army-recruit Pat Tillman. Through these latter examples, Sosik made people realize that good leaders do not have to be saints and they do not have to be people elected to high office.

What makes the book particularly interesting is the varied lineup of people featured -- from spiritual leaders Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II to musicians Brian Wilson and Johnny Cash to highly successful businesspeople Herb Kelleher, Anita Roddick and Warren Buffet, to children's television legend Mr. Rogers. The book includes more than two dozen profiles of leaders of character.

"Mr. Rogers is not your typical charismatic leader, but he tried to take every child and make them feel special, building the self-esteem that is critical for child development and also critical for business leaders in empowering their associates," said Sosik. "Brian Wilson proved that even when you're at the height of your creative success, you must innovate. His critically acclaimed album with the Beach Boys, 'Pet Sounds,' was very innovative, and it raised the bar for the Beatles, who went on to do the classic 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.' The same is true with companies like General Electric, which has always been highly innovative."

While charismatic leadership, or the ability to craft and deliver a message or vision to inspire followers, is incredibly powerful in spurring followers to help fulfill organizational objectives, authentic leaders who provide an accurate picture of who they are and what they stand for and who lead by example are able to elicit great loyalty among those who share similar values. Those who are able to combine the best of charisma and authenticity can become transformational leaders of the highest order and carry their organizations and followers to the greatest heights.

"Joe Namath is a fine example of someone who led with absolute conviction and authenticity," said Sosik. "When he came to the Jets there was some racial unrest in society and on the team, but he made it clear in no uncertain terms that the team needed to be united if the team was to be successful. Namath knew what he stood for and also knew what he would not stand for. Super Bowl III was the result of his authentic transformational leadership and the way he inspired his teammates to work together for a common purpose."

Sosik is a graduate of the State University of New York Binghamton and its Center for Leadership Studies. He said in playing sports and competing academically, he always has been interested in teams, including "how to motivate people to work together to be successful."

"Leading with Character: Stories of Valor and Virtue and the Principles They Teach" is published by Information Age Publishing.

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