



feature

spotlight



a leader isn't who you think it is

Kate Walker discovers the
true nature of leadership

If you'd asked me a little while ago whether I considered myself to be a leader, I would have affirmed without hesitation. Since childhood I've sought to be in control of every situation and as such, have grown rather adept at taking the lead, getting my voice heard and ultimately, micro-managing everybody and everything that surrounds me. Without wanting to sound cocky or egotistical, I thought I was a natural born leader. Surely to lead in and out of the workplace is to be a leader, right?

Well, apparently not.

On attending a leadership course recently, I was struck by an extract from Stephen Covey's book, *The seven habits of highly effective people*: 'Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; leadership is about determining whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall.'¹

On reflection, I realised that I was definitely more concerned with the former. Now that's no bad thing. We certainly need people who are skilled and effective in managing people, resources and services; it's what keeps everything ticking along. But we need leaders to transform our workplace and our world and make it a better place. So, who is and what makes a leader?

Google 'leadership' or 'what makes an effective leader?' and you will get hundreds of pages of suggestions, tips and opinions. Experts like Peter Guy Northouse, list traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity and sociability as essential for any successful leader.² Now that's all good and well for people who have the rare Myers Briggs personality trait³ of being introverted, intuitive, and who make decisions based on feelings and judgments, (also known as INFJs) qualities associated with legends like Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa, but what about the rest of us? Are we not capable of being leaders too?

Others, like Sandra Larson claim 'An **effective leader** is a person with a passion for a cause that is larger than they are. Someone with a dream and a vision that will better society, or at least,



some portion of it.⁴ I find her definition inspiring. But it's also fairly daunting. It immediately conjures up images of revolutionaries like Nelson Mandela and people who had massive agendas. But what if I'm not a visionary? What if I only see the 'smaller' issues that need changing. Does that not make me a leader?

When I look at examples of leadership from the Bible, what strikes me most is that many, if not all, of God's chosen leaders were imperfect and vulnerable individuals who showed

extraordinary faith, rather than listed traits we associate with a leadership role. David, the small shepherd boy who fought against the mighty giant Goliath is an obvious example. To lead not only demands faith in the mission and end goal, but also requires a little self-confidence in knowing that we are

the right person for the job. Take Moses; sure, he eventually led the Israelites away from slavery in Egypt to freedom, but only after God had dismissed his many excuses and insisted it be him who led his people. It's easy to forget that God knows us better than we know ourselves. Even when we screw up like Peter, who denied Jesus three times, God is gracious and still equips us to lead his people.

It's all too easy to give leadership roles to those with the loudest voice, those who are bossy and/or control-freaks and have what society considers 'leadership qualities'. But are they leaders? Are they able to ensure 'the ladder is leaning up against the right wall'? As the Bible illustrates, leaders aren't necessarily who we think they are. Their physical size, years of experience and personality traits are no barrier to a God-given mission. We can be used in the most unexpected and incredible ways; we just have to be willing to put our trust in God when he calls. 

Kate Walker works as a practice nurse in north London.

1. Covey S. *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999
2. Northouse PG. *Leadership: theory and practice*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013
3. Myers Briggs type indicator. bit.ly/2KfapYy
4. Larson S. What makes for an effective leader? *Free management library*. bit.ly/2M7uCF0