



How business leaders can follow Martin Luther King's example

Civil rights leader's qualities can translate to success in all ventures

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A view of the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Washington, D.C.

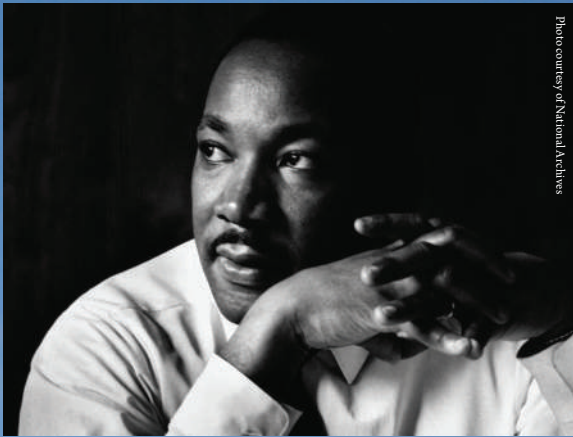


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The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s brand of authentic leadership was disruptive. Disruptive leaders bring joy, hope and a positive attitude to their companies and nations due primarily to their ability to engender greater trust and engagement. More importantly, they are not afraid to challenge the status quo or shake up long-held traditions in order to meet their mission or reach a noble cause.

Because many societies globally are currently living in commercial and political turmoil, disruptive authentic leadership is critically needed. King's innovative, groundbreaking leadership style disrupted civil inequity between the white majority and people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nobody before King even fathomed the oxymoron of peaceful protest. He made white leaders look at their hypocrisy and ultimately agree to begin honoring the constitutional "all men are created equal."

King epitomized four distinct characteristics that gave him the gift of bridging the racial divide like no leader before him, a gift that ultimately brought greater trust, unity and engagement to his nation. Likewise, to be a successful disruptive authentic leader in the business environment, leaders must embrace these four leadership characteristics as well. In this article, we describe how disruptive authentic leadership involves the development of these qualities.

People are hungry for this brand of authentic disruptive leadership. We are all witness to the civil unrest within the social landscape as well as the political unrest within multiple governments, perhaps most notably between political parties in the U.S. Yet within the business world, there often times exists friction between managers and their direct reports, CEOs and their board members, and various departments (e.g., sales and manufacturing). Whether it is within the social, political or business arena, King's brand of leadership appears to be both missed and missing today. Otherwise, headlines across the various media would be offering a more positive outlook.

Characteristic No. 1: Extraordinary commitment

The first characteristic of disruptive authentic leaders is extraordinary commitment. King continuously improved himself to motivate his followers more effectively. His "I have a dream" speech during the 1963 march on Washington resonated with people because most people had heard of goals or objectives but not dreams. He had an intense inner commitment that equipped him with more efficient human qualities than his predecessors.

Additionally, it was his passion that drove his commitment to raise civil consciousness to a level that touched his listening audience of every ethnicity at a deep emotional level.

Characteristic No. 2: Permanent change

King perpetuated a superior quality in himself and used each opportunity to continuously change and transform himself. A clear example of this feature can be seen in his awareness and friendship with Mahatma Gandhi. His familiarity with Gandhi formed the basis for a permanent change in his thoughts and attitude to promote anti-racism in the United States.

Characteristic No. 3: Self-awareness and emotional intelligence

King's high self-awareness cultivated his emotional intelligence. He was one of the first icons of SWOT – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. He was always seeking to improve his strengths and eliminate, or lessen, his weaknesses. His high level of discernment and continuous self-evaluation as an authentic leader provided him with a better understanding of himself and caused him to better understand others to know their feelings and beliefs better.

King had more respect and value for the beliefs and feelings of others. His “I Have a Dream” speech best captures this self-awareness when this authentic leader, understanding the white American community without negating their values and beliefs, focuses on portraying a future characterized by justice and equality that he felt should go hand in hand. This feature of authentic leadership communication is attractive and exciting in every society and for every person from every background and race. Ergo, we now have the new emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Characteristic No. 4: Mission and vision orientation

The next characteristic of King's authentic leadership is his mission and vision orientation. He was able to take a negative culturally evasive norm and instantly turn it around. This can be manifested in this characteristic of King's authentic leadership, his motivation to fulfill his life mission. By creating a big mission, he mobilized followers' beliefs to achieve the defined mission of self-awareness. “Every man has value, and value is represented of every man (and woman),” he stated.

King stayed with his followers in the most difficult times and the most unexpected events, and continuously motivated them to prepare their mentality to resist and overcome obstacles. He recognized and embraced an important goal when he referred to himself as “a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness,” and said, “We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

As a modern-day philosopher, he continuously motivated his followers through his communication channels when he said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope” and the phrase engraved on his monument in Washington: “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”

We should all embrace the notion of King as the father of diversity, equity and inclusion, as nations and countries become more focused on the long-term goals and prioritize authenticity in their macro development strategies. Becoming an authentic leader is a great benefit for political leaders. As Nancy Koehn, author and professor at Harvard University, said, “It's what we're thirsty for now – we are looking for leaders who can help us make a leap of faith and be integral to creating a better world, and to believe this is worthy of doing so, and possible.”

Regardless of the political or corporate position you are in



Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, takes part in the Civil Rights March on Washington Aug. 28, 1963.

today, the attempt to develop authentic leadership characteristics and improve emotional intelligence is key to becoming a successful, lasting and influential politician or leader like Martin Luther King Jr. ❖

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In King's own words: 10 quotes on leadership

As we mark the Martin Luther King Day national holiday Jan. 16, we offer 10 of Martin Luther King Jr.'s best quotes about leadership in an April 2018 *Forbes* article by Henna Inam on the 50th anniversary of his 1968 assassination.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy."

In King's context, the civil rights struggle of the 1960s produced chaos and uncertainty. Such disruption exists today in economic, political and social contexts which effective leadership can help to overcome.

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

Inam writes that transformational leaders are driven by inner values that provide the courage to stand up in the face of adversity and do the right thing.

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

Servant leadership was the hallmark of King's public life, the idea of leading people by providing for their needs, not his own. "Transformational leaders are motivated by creating a positive change in the lives of others," Inam wrote.

"If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live."

Transformational leadership involves a full commitment to the stated goals.

"A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus."

True leaders forge a common set of values and objectives from the will of those around them rather than force their ideas upon others.

"People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

A polarized world needs to be reminded of our common humanity and aspirations through personal experience and communication.

"There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love."

Failure in life and in business are inevitable, but should not deter from continuing to push toward success.

"Ten thousand fools proclaim themselves into obscurity, while one wise man forgets himself into immortality."

The satisfaction of daily victories is more important than the need to take credit for any individual success.

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."

Like Gandhi, King believed pure honesty and "truth to power" is a way to earn respect from those one seeks to lead.

"All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence."

Transformational leaders respect the labors of everyone in an organization, from the top executive to the shop floor, and value everyone who contributes to the common cause.



Photo by Getty Images

The Ebenezer Baptist Church sanctuary is located on the grounds of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site in Atlanta, Georgia.