LEADERSHIP

Leadership in Tough Times:
Ten Qualities of Crisis Leaders

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Written in May 2020. The qualities that made some leaders effective during the pandemic apply to leading families, teams, and organizations through any crisis.

I've been thinking about leadership even more than usual during this difficult time. And I am particularly impressed with many of our U. S. governors as well as some global leaders, such as Jacinda Ardern and Angela Merkel. In considering what makes these individuals so effective, I identified several qualities that they demonstrate:

- **Transparency, lack of defensiveness.** They share useful information, seemingly unconcerned about whether it makes them look good or not. They communicate early and often about where things stand and how the situation is moving.
- **Empathy/compassion.** They acknowledge the suffering and difficulties others are experiencing. They express emotional solidarity and are willing to share personal information that makes them relatable as fellow human beings.
- **Vision/strategy.** They articulate a picture of a better future, a time when the crisis will be in the past and life will be good, albeit different. They describe in simple terms a path for achieving it and display confidence that we will get there together.
- **Clarity in directing or influencing others to action.** They are willing to be blunt and direct in letting people know what they can or should do to help reduce or resolve the crisis. Equally, they don't hesitate to let people know when their actions are impeding the solution.
- **Acceptance of responsibility, refusal to blame others.** If they have been wrong, or slow to action, they tell us rather than waiting for others to call them out.
- **Collaboration and willingness to share the limelight.** They give credit and put the focus on others who are key to making things work and step back to invite them to take the lead as needed.
- **Action orientation.** They are willing to take the risks involved in doing something rather than the risks of doing nothing.
- **Flexibility.** They are willing to change course as they receive new information or as the situation demands.

- **The ability to create meaning in the lives of others.** They articulate the importance of seemingly small actions; they enlist everyone to be part of the solution and remind us of our role in making change happen.
- **Recognition of the power of symbolic acts.** They show rather than tell. If they ask something of us, they make sure we see that they are doing it as well.

I recently heard a conversation with author Erik Larson, author of many excellent nonfiction books, about his new work, The Splendid and the Vile, about Churchill during the Blitz. In the book, he describes how Churchill showed the British people how to live courageously during the darkest of times. His wit, fearlessness, and ability to articulate and remind his constituents of the character of the British people undoubtedly contributed enormously to their success in withstanding the onslaught of terror by the Nazis during that strange and frightening year.

We are experiencing a time where the enemy is less visible and where it might be easier to turn away. These leaders are showing us how to be our best selves in the face of a crisis. These leadership qualities build trust, alignment, hope, and a sense of mission. And these same qualities can serve us well as we lead our families, communities, teams, and organizations through this time and into whatever comes next.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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