

How Do You Set Their Souls on Fire?

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Leaders become great not because they possess the power to force obedience, but because people willingly and energetically follow their leadership. So ...

What did Genghis Kahn have in common with Mahatma Gandhi, or Mother Theresa with Adolf Hitler? What would explain their almost mystical powers to set the souls of their followers on fire? On a broader scale, what quality do great leaders possess that motivates people to follow passionately, even when doing so endangers their lives?

Of the leaders discussed here, all turned their followers into winners and made lives meaningful. They made people feel important.

Genghis Kahn's victories turned his people into great conquerors; Mahatma Gandhi showed the down-trodden how to exert power over government without resorting to violence. Mother Theresa taught her followers that by sacrificing their lives for the poor, they became equal to kings in the eyes of God. Hitler used the German people's desire for prosperous united "Fatherland" to build his Third Reich.

Scholars searched for years to determine the secrets of leaders – were they born, chosen by God, or were there special characteristics that set leaders apart? Instead of common denominators in the character of leaders, scholars instead found extremes. Of those mentioned here, one was a warrior, one a pacifist, one a saint, the other considered a madman. Some were smart, some dumb. No consistency in personal characteristics existed.

Next, the academicians decided to list all the wise and virtuous acts of leaders. They even threw in a few vices. The list consisted of a series of contradictions. Pay attention to details, but don't micromanage. Be compassionate while being ruthless, etc. Again, the scholars fell short. They were searching in the wrong area. Instead of asking 'What makes leaders great?' they should have been asking 'What makes people want to follow?'

These leaders became great not because they possessed the power to force obedience, but because people willingly and energetically followed their leadership. They stirred emotions and harnessed a tremendous energy by fulfilling man's most basic non-biological need: the desire for a meaningful life. Despite terrible adversity, their people continued to serve them because only they fed that daily hunger for dignity, worth and a sense of meaning.

One lesson noncommissioned officers can learn from this is that great leadership cannot exist apart from the human need for a sense of meaning. Soldiers derive that sense from confidence in their abilities to succeed, respect from their superiors and associates, membership in an important group and service to an ideal greater than themselves.

First, every NCO knows the best way to build Soldier confidence is through training that allows Soldiers to take on tough challenges and to succeed. This is what makes Soldiers; it's the reason most joined the Army. Without good training they don't feel any legitimacy as Soldiers, and their roles in the Army become meaningless.

Training, therefore, is the NCO's first responsibility - the first element that makes Soldiers winners and sets leaders apart.

The second element is respect. Any time you, as a leader, degrade a Soldier, you have violated your contract to make subordinates winners. The experiences of humiliation and a sense of meaning are not compatible. The Soldier who is made to feel worthless cannot, at the same time, believe that he fills any meaningful role. Even when Soldiers behave in immature or hostile ways, your duty is to treat them with respect by responding professionally. When leaders enter into personal conflicts, they damage their professional relationships with their Soldiers.

The Soldier's third need is the sense of belonging to an important and identifiable group. It is in the small group, such as a platoon or squad, where Soldiers work together and know each other's abilities that the individual becomes important.

The small group gives people a sense of meaning. An NCO can increase this sense of meaning by increasing the importance of his squad or platoon. Anyone who belongs to a special circle of people must himself be special. To heighten this sense of importance, a group also must have its own identity. Thus, organizations develop their own unit T-shirts, handshakes, mottos or ways of speaking, all to make their groups distinctive. It is no accident that artillery Soldiers wear red socks with their dress green uniforms or that cavalry Soldiers wear spurs. These distinctions make their groups stand out - and therefore special in the eyes of their members.

The one thing that makes a group especially important, however, is its dedication to an ideal or principle greater than the individual himself. This leads us to the fourth element that gives Soldiers a sense of meaning. People determine their importance by measuring how much other people need or appreciate them. When more people rely on an individual, that person becomes more important. When a Soldier puts self-interest aside and begins to serve the needs of people in his unit, he increases his importance to others. That importance increases more when he dedicates himself to the service of the nation.

When you put meaning into your Soldiers' lives by training them in specialized skills, developing cohesion in an elite but small group and dedicating that group to the professional ethic of service, those Soldiers will form a bond and be inspired. And you will be the NCO who sets their souls on fire.