



## **Leadership Lessons from Evolutionary Psychology**

*by Joel DiGirolamo*

*“But Fred, our workers need direction now more than ever. They’re looking for us to provide leadership to help navigate through this downturn,” Sally exclaimed.*

*“Yee-aa, I hear ya Sally, but the last time I tried providing more leadership to my group, they complained that I was micro-managing them. And that was in good times. I can’t win.”*

By traveling back in time I believe that we can understand how Sally and Fred came to divergent beliefs. Let’s start by looking at how members of our species may have led 10,000 years ago.

Anthropological studies of primitive tribes provide us a peek into those times. Most tribes have a hierarchy of chiefs and elders. In these instances survival is frequently difficult and food scarce. However, in some cases no permanent hierarchy or dominant roles exist, as exemplified in the Ache tribes in Paraguay. These nomadic people travel each day in small groups hunting game, honey or extracting palm hearts. For the Ache, food is relatively abundant and few predators exist. The leadership of a group will change from day to day—what we might call distributed leadership today.

A glimpse at the !Kung tribe in Africa provides a similar perspective. Food is relatively abundant for these peoples and decisions are made by group consensus. The Hadza in Tanzania have no system of leadership or elders. In all three cases, research has shown a daily caloric intake above average for indigenous tribes.

Secondly, we find that examples of great leadership in pre-Modern history center almost exclusively around warfare and slavery, with a few exceptions. Two that come to mind are the Mayans with their ability to develop huge, intricate structures and calendars, as well as King Ashoka who spread Buddhism in modern-day India.

In the case of the Mayans, the society must have had sufficient resources to allow workers to build large structures and study the passage of time rather than hunt, gather, or cultivate food. In addition, I believe that a strong leader or group of leaders envisioned the structures and calendars and set the proper conditions in place for their creation.

King Ashoka had been a ruthless conqueror of territory but saw the error in his ways as he witnessed scores of people laid waste at the hands of his army. It was at this moment that he resolved to spread the peace found in Buddhism across his kingdom.

In our third segment, let us move forward to a time just before the Industrial Revolution, say, the late 1700s and early 1800s. At this time most goods were built in craft industries. People worked for themselves and today would be considered entrepreneurs.

Enter the Industrial Revolution with replaceable parts, mass production, and large factories. It seems to be a universal law that as objects come closer together and their density increases change takes place. We see this from the atomic to the galactic scale. The same law applies to people. When a great number of



people gather, change takes place.

As factory work continued productivity rose but workers became bored with their jobs and pay was significantly raised in order to reduce turnover. People migrated to large cities, seeking the higher pay. Changes occurred. The concept of modern-day leadership emerged along with the possibility of worker exploitation as Marx and Engels were so quick to argue. We have seen a similar pattern in modern-day China, although the recent recession sent many factory workers packing back to the countryside.

And so we see the results of densely packed industries and economic activities. From tulipmania to dot com bubbles to subprime mortgages we become whipsawed by economic instabilities of ever-greater intensity.

Now let us circle back to pull these disparate pieces together. We can compare today's organizations with tribes of the past. Workers come together just as families gathered in tribes. As when food was scarce, in difficult economic times people look to leaders for direction and vision, for a path forward. In good times, as when food is plentiful, people and teams understand their role in the organization and little intervention is necessary. Most people seem to know what to do and bristle when they feel micro-managed.

As we look back at our opening scenario, we see that both Sally and Fred are likely correct in their individual observations but were unaware of the powerful effect the situation has on the best leadership style for a given moment. We also see that the concept of leadership for peaceful purposes is a relatively new phenomena, as is the potential for worker exploitation in hard economic times.

Your job as a highly effective leader is to build a high performance team and focus its energy in the direction of your stated goals.

Research has shown that you will be more effective by taking into account your unique situation as you guide your team.

So take time to listen as you talk with your team. Understand what is important to your workers so that you know how to motivate them and prevent them from dropping out. Maintain the team's focus on the goals. And don't forget, with the power of your position comes responsibility. Lead with responsibility to your organization, and sensitivity and compassion for each and every team member.

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