

The ABC of Leadership

Leadership is rooted in an inner authority that respects the unique life of others and encourages that unique life to reach out for something still greater. To have this inner authority, we must be “educated educators,” that is, someone who is already “on the road” to forming his own life and knowing that this gives me the foundation for understanding others and leading them to great goals. In a word: if I am working on my own growth, I can help others grow. The foundation stones of this education are the core Christian values of *freedom* and *love*.

To be a leader one needs to:

A = *Act* like a leader

B = *Be* a leader

C = *Communicate* as a leader

In other words, it involves action. This we all expect. But action is always built on our being, on who we are as leaders. And crucial to all leadership is communication.

A. *Act Like a Leader*

Challenges - a leader takes on the challenges by defining them and accepting them,

Sources - a leader connects to the sources of life and grace on which the group is built,

Response - a leader helps the group determine and carry out the appropriate response.

B. *Be a Leader*

Here is an outline of how Father Kentenich was a leader and how we can be leaders like him.

Welcome: We cannot lead unless we first welcome the persons God sends us. This was one of Father’s secrets: he always considered each person who came to him as sent by God. It is one of the most difficult things for us to learn to do today. We are so inundated with information and encounters with people that we learn to tune out both information and people. We often have personal obstacles which keep us from “putting down the newspaper” of our own personal needs and worries in order for my soul to do more than just mumble “good morning” to the people I meet. But if I really can welcome people and take them in just the way they are and just the way they come to me, I will have already taken a first step toward healing the “soul’s lack of roots” and unlocking to someone the so-often unexpected “wonderland” of natural and supernatural attachments. “Welcome” also applies to the circumstances God sends me and I may have to welcome some very difficult circumstances as a leader (think of Father being sent to the Concentration camp in Dachau!). If we can accept all things as coming from God, our leadership will benefit. Father describes the attitude this way in *Heavenwards*:

“Use us according to your will....

whether we meet with failure or success

we want to proclaim your love” (p. 14).

Listen: this is followed by listening. Leading does not mean that I do the talking. It

does not mean that I stand at the front of the line. It means that “I know my sheep and mine know me”, that is, that I listen to them and what God is trying to tell me through them. After all, it is not *my* group, it is *God’s* group. In a letter from Milwaukee to Fr. Menningen, Fr. Kentenich reminded his close confidant of how he had led even the conferences with hundreds of participants by listening. Our founder said:

“It was always my self-understood custom before beginning a conference to exchange, even if only briefly, a few words with at least one participant, so as to have a chance to peer briefly into the depths of the soul and discover which spiritual currents were alive there. And during the talks it became second nature to me to read from the radiance of the eyes [of the listeners] what was going on in the souls, so as to connect with it, build on it and extend and complete the lines sketched there, and to slowly but surely help create a great community atmosphere in which each individual felt at home and which would enthuse and form each one”.

“One should not say that this is an art one must be born with. Quite the contrary! It is my conviction that one can gradually acquire this skill if:

- (1) one has a life of personal prayer and striving,
- (2) one faithfully uses the above method of meditation [looking back and looking forward on the events of the day, every day],
- (3) one leads souls in the way I have indicated [especially through personal contact and interest in the person=s needs and life],
- (4) one works at acquiring a philosophical grasp of final truths and realities and at coming to feel at home [in these ultimate truths and realities],
- (5) one likewise strives to be free from self-centeredness and to be open to the differentness of the other, including his shortcomings, his different worries and struggles.

Here, too, the old adage applies: repetition forms the good habit. And if one has a deep love for the other person, this mysterious art will soon be learned.” (December 9, 1953)

Therefore, if I can listen to the other, and to God speaking to me through the other, I will be well on the way to being an effective leader, be it as a one-on-one apostle or the leader of a nation!

Respond: In the end, a leader also seeks to right response out of interest in the other person and in the unique life that God has placed there. Here we can often make the mistake of responding too soon. We must remember that I can only really respond *after welcoming and listening*. Responding too soon can mean I am imposing my own situation on the other when it might be exactly the wrong thing. But once I grasp the situation, I am also called to find a response **B** one that is both *from me* (not just from a book or general plan) and *with the others* (not without the involvement of those I lead. We must also remember that often, especially in personal problems or long-term programs of growth, the final shape of the response will be a long time in coming; patience will be required.

Here are two down-to-earth examples from the Milwaukee years that might help you appreciate “welcome, listen and respond.” Ask yourself where the three points appear...

C. *Communicate* as a Leader

Finally, a leader needs to know how to communicate.

Know Your People: You can only be a leader if you know your people. After all that I have already said about “Welcome and Listen” I don’t think I need to go into any further detail.

Know Your Material: Communication as a leader also means I know my material. I do not need to know the whole encyclopedia, but if my task requires me to know a page, a paragraph or even just a single sentence, I must know it and know it well. Otherwise my leadership will be built on sand.

Know that God is Greater: We will often make mistakes. Know that God is greater than our mistakes (“God writes straight on crooked lines”). We will often have to make decisions without knowing the outcome and even have to make “death leaps” of trust. Know that God is greater and plans the best outcome. And at times we will be swept along by forces beyond our control or God will signal to us to make an about face. Know that

God is greater and that he sees the whole picture, certainly much more than we can see. This can be crucial for my communication as a leader, for if I pretend that *I am greater*, communications will soon tangle and breakdown.