Leading Quietly

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“*A sudden glow of patriotism was enkindled within me and presented my King and Country as my patron. ‘Well then,’ I exclaimed, ‘I will be a hero and, confiding in Providence, I will brave every danger*.’ ”

These are the words with which Horatio Nelson describes the start of his extraordinarily public, up-front and garish leadership career.  He went on to feats of extraordinary courage, and exemplary public relations: he wrote his own version of events for the newspapers whenever he could – often drafting his dispatches in the midst of battle. And he managed his public image from the earliest days – the first full length portrait of himself he commissioned as a lieutenant, aged 19, but had re-painted to include both his captain’s uniform and the Nicaraguan castle he had helped to capture two years later. He wanted to advertise his splendid achievements, made much of his own contributions to collective victories, and made sure we was recognisable in cartoons and sketches long before the age of the paparazzi. His one-armed, bejewelled presence is an icon even today – though few realise that in life he was even more showy – the plume of brilliants in his hat (a gift from the sultan of Turkey) was powered by clockwork to spin in a shower of light. He was in every way the archetypal romantic hero, and it is perhaps significant that his contemporaries included Coleridge, Shelly and Byron.

But our modern age is perhaps less enamoured of such heroes; we are certainly wary of heroic gestures amongst our leaders – Peter Drucker, who died last month aged 95, once said that “the 20th Century produced three great leaders: Hitler, Stalin and Mao.”  One cannot help thinking that a little more quiet diplomacy might have produced better results in Iraq, while admiring acts of heroic bravery by combatants (willing and unwilling) on all sides.

So is ours an age for quiet leadership? If the purpose of leadership is to get things done, I am sure we can all think of examples of unassuming but influential people steering the course of major innovations and changes.  I know of one man, president of the supervisory board of two of Holland’s most significant companies, who is doing more to reform the pensions and savings industry in that country than any number of gesturing politicians; but he wouldn’t want me to mention his name. He has nothing to gain by being recognised, and his ego doesn’t need such brazen appreciation.  That is partly because he recognises the work of many others, the need for their willing and original contributions. Like most quiet leaders, he chooses to facilitate, to encourage, sometimes to provoke, and to find pleasure in watching others take initiative and responsibility. Actually, that’s most of the story: this particular leader has a lifelong commitment to democracy in all its forms, and in his own mind he is pursuing these ideals through all his work. He is a determined man, but not driven. Recent research[[1]](http://jonathangosling.com/points-of-interest.html#_ftn1) into communities facing complex and uncertain challenges shows that the most effective leaders are those with a sense of *repose* – a tolerance for uncertainty coupled with self-aware creativity.  It is significant that this research focuses on responses to climate change – transformations over which we can have little individual impact, but require sustained action with constant learning and adaptation.  Perhaps this exposes an important point about leading quietly – it recognizes that much is beyond our personal control, and that more activity does not necessarily equal more or better effects.

Let’s summarise the qualities we are looking for here, because it seems that we have a new kind of hero in mind – not the romantic heroism of Nelson, rather something more in tune with the stoic values expressed by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius – Roman statesman and emperor facing times at least as turbulent as our own. They set out three ‘disciplines’ of the wise leader:

* Non-attachment to one’s own emotional responses. Hunches and gut reactions are evidence of some sort, but not reasons to act.
* The will to act, to change things for the better.
* A sense of proportion that comes from the ability to distinguish between background changes, the impulse to act, and the effects that one might actually have.

These three virtues, detachment, action and reason, are surprisingly common in managers’ own descriptions of how they would like to work. They aspire to lead quietly, even if sometimes they admire heroic leadership.[[2]](http://jonathangosling.com/points-of-interest.html#_ftn2) In fact, if we look closely at Nelson, as we do in our new book, ‘*Nelson’s Way, Leadership Lessons from the Great Commander*’[[3]](http://jonathangosling.com/points-of-interest.html#_ftn3), we find that the blustery image of the hero is underpinned by a powerful sense of vocation and tremendous diligence to work at the small things that matter so much. As he took on more senior and complex responsibilities, the three stoic virtues came to characterise his leadership style.

But is there really such a thing as a ‘quiet leader’? Let’s face it – leaders are almost by definition people who stand out from the norm, who innovate and sooner or later get noticed. On the other hand, it must be open to all of us to *lead quietly*. It may not always be necessary, and I would hesitate to make a moral issue of it. But it is an option – and it probably works!

[[1]](http://jonathangosling.com/points-of-interest.html#_ftnref) Patricia Gayá-Wicks. Contact the author for further details

[[2]](http://jonathangosling.com/points-of-interest.html#_ftnref) Case, P and Gosling, J. “Wisdom of the Moment: premodern perspectives on organizational action” delivered to Critical Management Studies conference, July 2005. Available from the author.

[[3]](http://jonathangosling.com/points-of-interest.html#_ftnref) Jones, S. and Gosling, J., 2005 *Nelson’s Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Commander* London and Boston: Nicholas Brealey

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