

Leadership Lessons from a Quiet Leader



By Bonni Carson DiMatteo

What is leadership? How do we know when we see and hear it? Is it seen in the captains of countries, corporations or communities? Is it heard from podiums or corner offices? The research from Harvard School of Public Leadership tells us there is a leadership crisis. It is a crisis of confidence, trust, and integrity. We have been jaundiced by a generation of corporate and civic leaders some of whom had tainted vision and values. What are the qualities that are missing and where do we look for leadership?

Almost 60 years ago the last place we might have expected to look for leadership was on a Montgomery bus.

And yet, on December 1, 1955, when a diminutive passenger occupied her seat, she set a direction for an entire country. No small feat in leadership.

Rosa Parks has a lot to teach us about leadership. Humble, determined, unflappable, self-sacrificing, she was focused on a bold vision. She was willing to take a courageous risk, not knowing the results. Driven by values and integrity, there was no other option for her but to stay in that seat.

Parks was a classic Level 5 leader in a Jim Collis true sense of the word. Her vision was a literal bus as Jim Collin's was a metaphoric one. Hers was a vision of a bus free of segregation and hubris. Hers was a statement in subtle irreversible certainty. She was not going to move and in her stillness she led this nation to another road. Hers was a call for action that could not be ignored. It started a momentum that could not be stopped.

She was never interested in self-aggrandizement and notoriety,

Like Collin's Level 5 leader, she demurred from taking credit, but she was determined to get results. She happily passed the power to Martin Luther King who could articulate in words what she had said in gesture. They had the same dream. They marched the same march. They heard the same song. It was shared power and succession planning.

Her leadership was a quiet one, but not any less powerful.

As we pay tribute to her now as the first woman to be laid in state in Washington, she seems like a new icon of leadership. Named the Mother of Civil Rights, she led by being a role model, by inspiring a city to walk instead of ride and a country to reexamine itself and its values. Her statement ignited the genesis of changes in people's assumptions, actions, and attitudes.

What are the lessons learned from this great leader?

- **Create a compelling mission that ignites passion and commitment**
- **Communicate a vision that transforms people to another level**
- **Create a culture that is driven by values that are platforms for a call to action not platitudes**
- **Challenge assumptions**
- **Take courageous risks**
- **Lead by example and integrity**
- **Inspire others to lead**
- **Be humble**
- **Give credit to others**
- **Follow through**
- **Pass the torch to successors**

We need more leaders like that in our corporations, our community, and our country.

The quiet leader can create levels of greatness, if only we will listen beyond the cacophony. Rosa Parks sought no limelight, but instead lit a candle for everyone to see.

It's the kind of leadership we need in this age of a leadership vacuum.

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