

THE ROOT OF LEADERSHIP AFFLICTION: A STUDY OF EMOTIONS

To become better leaders, it is often helpful to look at others successes, as well as their downfalls. Looking at the root of leadership affliction brings us to a study of emotions. Today we will take a look at how emotional dynamics impact leadership, and the marks of emotional maturity that show up in exceptional leaders. Today's case study may have all leaders taking a look in the mirror.

EMOTIONAL IMMATURITY

It is a sad fact that many individuals who rise to top leadership positions are driven by personal, emotional need rather than the noble aspiration to serve others.

Lyndon Johnson, the 36th president of the United States, is an example of an afflicted leader afflicting others due to his precarious inner life. While he achieved significant legislative success, nevertheless, his leadership in the Senate, and later as President is a case study in one of the primary drivers of afflicted leadership—emotional immaturity. I draw the following largely from the work of Johnson biographer Robert Caro.

LYNDON JOHNSON'S BACKGROUND.

Johnson grew up in an undistinguished, poor family. While they didn't miss meals or skimp on necessities, they lived in a constant state of economic insecurity. Johnson was an awkward athlete, only average in school. Whatever the source of his inner drives—the humiliation and shame of growing up in poverty, the insecurity of seeing his family struggle to make ends meet—from an early age Johnson needed to be in the forefront, to be on center stage. He craved distinction. He had an insatiable desire for attention, but more than this, he needed respect and deference. He needed to exhibit himself to the world and prove himself worthy and strong. Consequently, he needed to lead, to dominate, to bask in notoriety, all the while feeding off of the admiration of loyal followers.

JOHNSON'S EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS.

Johnson's considerable personal assets—his famous intensity, boldness and confidence—originated not from a place of inner strength, but emotional weakness. On the surface he appeared calm and confident. But beneath his public personae, Johnson lived in an unusually precarious and fragile emotional landscape. He was plagued by a primal fear of failure and insignificance, a profound sense of insecurity and vulnerability. His inner life was a pressure-cooker of unrelenting, self-imposed demands for perfection—an emotional necessity to maintain his illusion of mastery. Biographer Robert Caro observed, "All his life he had 'talked big'—had boasted, bragged, swaggered, strutted, tried to stand out, shove himself into the forefront—so incessantly that he had revealed a need to talk big, a desperate thirst for attention and admiration."

The emotional need that shaped Lyndon Johnson most and deepest was his soaring ambition and unquenchable thirst for power.

His frantic intensity was the manifestation of fear, the fear of a man fleeing something terrible— insignificance, powerless and therefore a meaningless life. Caro observed, “It was not the desire to help somebody [that satisfied his needs] but to be somebody that drove him most strongly.” One Johnson colleague commented, “Lyndon Johnson believed in nothing, nothing but his own ambition. Everything he did—everything—was for his ambition. His energy and his talent, the talent that was beyond talent and was genius, were at the service of some hidden but vast ambition.”

Johnson is an example of what happens when the dark side of the human condition meets up with power; when low emotional maturity intersects with the pressures and challenges of leading.

Perhaps the best way to identify the attitudes and behaviors grounded in emotional immaturity is to contrast these with emotional maturity. Toward this end, I offer five marks of emotional maturity to evaluate Johnson’s leadership—and the leadership of any top leader afflicted by emotional immaturity.

EMOTIONAL RECOGNITION AND REGULATION.

Emotionally mature individuals have the perceptive capacity to recognize the contours of their emotional landscape and the inner strength to regulate the negative emotions associated with stress, difficulty and setbacks.

They “catch themselves” before they respond out of a ready repertoire of maladaptive attitudes and behaviors—withdrawal, anger, fear and anxiety. Johnson was oblivious to the emotional undercurrents that shaped his life and relationships. Case in point is his epic temper. If his coffee was not hot enough, if the phone wasn’t dialed fast enough, if he didn’t get the answer he wanted soon enough, Johnson flew into an explicative-laced tirade, leaving his staff stunned by his fury, but more motivated to get it right the next time around. Caro recounts, “If an assistant’s desk was cluttered with papers, he might say, with a snarl in his voice, ‘Clean up your #\$% desk.’ If an assistant’s desk was clean, he might say, with a snarl in his voice, ‘I hope you’re your mind isn’t as empty as that desk.’”

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Emotionally mature individuals are resilient. Resilience is derived from the Latin term *resilire*, meaning “to bounce or spring back.”

Emotional resilience is the strength and durability to absorb the stress, shocks and pressures of daily life, to be stretched momentarily out of shape by loss and adversity, disappointment and failure, but then to regain one’s emotional equilibrium.

Johnson lacked the capacity to “bound back,” and replenish his “emotional tank.” As one of his aids observed, “...he was very, very easily hurt.” Possessing little or no emotional capital, Johnson craved to be admired, supported, and validated. He depended on his staff to loan him emotional support in the form of praise and affirmation to bolster his flagging esteem, and fill his ever-near-empty and perpetually leaking emotional fuel tank.

It is easy to see how emotional dynamics impact leaders, especially when looking at someone else’s downfall. Yet, we are all susceptible to these dark emotional undercurrents. Today, as we begin to look at the marks of emotional maturity, let’s take a look in the mirror to see areas where we can improve our own leadership. Do we recognize our own emotional landscape? What is our level of emotional resilience?

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