

The will to lead

Kamran Z. Rizvi
Feb 14, 2025

“Unless the distant goals of meaning, greatness, and destiny are addressed, we can't make an intelligent decision about what to do tomorrow morning - much less set strategy for a company or for a human life. Nothing is more practical than for people to deepen themselves. The more you understand the human condition, the more effective you are as a businessperson. Human depth makes business sense.”

Peter Koestenbaum¹

¹ Koestenbaum is classically trained philosopher with degrees in philosophy, physics, and theology from Stanford, Harvard, and Boston University. This quote was taken from the article, Do You Have The Will To Lead? by Polly Labarre. Published in Fast Company, Issue No. 32. Feb 2000

I have often wondered why some people in positions of significant responsibility, whether in government or in business, don't provide the kind of leadership we expect i.e., leadership that exemplifies meaning and greatness. It seems they lack the *will* to lead.

You may have heard the question: Are you ready, willing and able? These three words, 'ready,' 'willing,' and 'able,' when lived by an individual make him/her a potent force to be reckoned with. Readiness implies preparedness, and that's easy to see; ability is determined by the knowledge and competence you have, to deal with a given situation - this is self-evident. However, your willingness is a somewhat abstract quality, but one which can be felt by others. Willingness refers to your enthusiasm and eagerness to achieve what you passionately desire. It's your calling from within.

Many leaders today seem to lack the depth and substance that commands our admiration and respect for them. This is primarily due to their lack of will to lead and becomes painfully evident when we witness their paralyzing indecision in times of crisis. How we are responding, in our own spheres of influence, to global challenges posed by climate change, growing social injustice, poverty, the AIDS pandemic, presents an alarming picture for us.

Why do leaders prefer to sit on the fence even though the stakes are high? There is no better place to commence our search for acquiring greater depth and understanding than a dictionary. I consulted Random House Webster's dictionary and looked up the word 'will'. Will is the faculty of conscious and deliberate action; the power of choosing and deciding; and an expression of our purpose or determination; wish or desire.

The degree to which you care for any cause or situation is directly proportional to the intensity of your willingness to lead. An apathetic disposition hardly suits a person who is entrusted with great responsibility. However, caring alone will not do. Your will to lead will be ignited when you exercise your power to make choices, particularly when faced with tough situations.

Leaders face a multitude of dilemmas. For example, what would you do as a CEO, if one of your managers takes you into confidence and admits to embezzling fifty thousand dollars? If the manager had not *trusted* you, you might never have discovered who committed the act. It was the manager's trust in you that led you to this discovery! Do you keep that bond of confidence and somehow deal with the misdemeanor privately? Or do you report the manager to concerned authorities? In other words, do you uphold the principle of trust or expose the criminal? By revealing the manager, you will send out a signal in your company that

trusting does not pay – in fact, it can be detrimental to your business. It would breed fear and doubt amongst your people, which is counterproductive to creating an empowered culture based on openness, which is vital for remaining competitive. You know how bureaucracy in its extreme can make any enterprise unresponsive and slow.

When faced with difficult choices some leaders hope that passage of time will take care of the problem. I recall an incident some years ago, when a bank manager was sitting on a loan application from one of his staff for over a month. On enquiry, he declared smugly, that in time, the applicant will soon realize he does not need the loan! Well, sometimes such a tactic may work, but mostly it doesn't! In fact, it's in bad taste, particularly if the need of the applicant is genuine and urgent. In this case the loan applied for was to pay accumulated medical bills of his children.

It is our everyday decisions, both tactical and strategic, that mark the trajectory of our life into the future. Even though most of us realize the importance of being decisive in our lives, it becomes exceedingly difficult if you are not clear on your values and purpose. Recently Richard Branson² wrote in his diary: "What are the motives of doing such things? A month ago, I was at an all-time low. I seemed to have run out of a purpose in my life.

² From his book: *Screw It, Let's Do It*. (Virgin Books, 2006). P.101

I'd proved myself in many areas. I'd just turned forty. I was seeking a new challenge..." Later he reflected on this entry and remarked, "When I re-read what I had written, I realized that as a businessman, I can do a great deal of good." He went on to say, "I meet incredible people like Nelson Mandela, world leaders like the Russian premier, and people of vast wealth like Bill Gates and Microsoft's lesser-known co-founder Paul Allen. In fact, people in business and the very wealthy are in a unique position. They can connect with everyone, whether high or low, in any country, through a network of goodwill."

To help you gain further clarity on your purpose, try answering the following questions: What is the meaning of your life? Why do you live? What principles do you stand for? How would you like to be remembered after you've gone from this world? Your top-of-mind, one-line answers to such, seemingly simple questions, will be very revealing. They will help you focus on what it means for you to be alive today and how you see greatness. You will also gain a perspective on how you see your personal destiny. As a result of this kind of reflection, you will find courage and power that will make you decisive - an attractive quality in a leader.

Intensity for what you care for, gives rise to courage. Courage is the quality of your mind that enables you to face your fears. Fear can be your worst enemy. It paralyzes you and steals from you your will to lead. You can, therefore, cultivate

your will to lead, by confronting your fears, which are mostly unfounded. Fear of failure, fear of losing face and fear of the unknown are the most common. The good news is that our fears are mostly false.

There is a poignant acronym for fear: 'False Emotions Appear Real.' The following case study, based on a real event involving a management consultant and his client, illustrates the delusive nature of fear.

It was a weekend in 1993 in Karachi. A management consultant was at home skimming a book, History of Saracens by Ameer Ali. In it he read about the battles of Badr, Uhud and Khandaq. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had led these famous battles. Badr and Khandaq were won, while Uhud was not! On reflection, the consultant realized that God was conveying an important message through these historic events. The lesson of Uhud was this: That regardless of who is leading you, if you and others in the team are not acting on principles, everyone loses. This is what happened in Uhud. Even though Muslims were well equipped and in sufficient numbers to face their enemy, they did not win the battle. Sensing victory on seeing the apparent retreat of the enemy, some of the soldiers succumbed to greed. They left their positions, even though they were told not to, and went after the loot. Opponents took advantage of this lapse.

Conversely, Muslims won in Badr and Khandaq because they stood firm on

principles even though the odds were great. For instance, in the Battle of Badr, Muslims were heavily outnumbered, and in the Battle of Khandak, non-Muslim allies reneged in the heat of battle, causing a significant breach in the defenses.

Just as the consultant was reflecting on these historic events, his phone rang. It was the general manager (GM) of his client company who wanted to discuss a serious problem urgently. He had only been in the company for three months when the challenge hit him. The consultant invited the GM over to his office and they got talking.

It is worth bearing in mind that the consultant had carried out a visioning exercise for this client a few months earlier. The intervention had involved all their two hundred employees in different parts of Pakistan. Outcome of the extensive exercise was a clear vision and mission statement that was known and supposedly understood by all in the organization. Values and guiding principles had also been established through consultation. The opening line of the mission statement read, *"Seeking Allah's pleasure in all that we do."* This ambitious claim reflected the aspirations of everyone in the company and was approved by the board.

The GM described the problem thus: His regional manager (RM) had threatened to resign if his demand for a higher salary package was not approved. The RM in question was heading a team of

seventy, in a highly competitive market, at the height of the sales season. The GM was in no position to justify this increase on account of company policy which was recently formulated on a participative basis and was seen to be an equitable compensation structure. The GM was afraid that by not acceding to his RM's request, the RM would leave, taking his team with him. His fear was that this would create a huge dent in the sales of the company. Budget will not be achieved in his first year at the company.

The consultant asked the GM to share his initial thoughts on this problem. The GM said, "My instinct tells me that I should agree to the RM's terms; start looking for his replacement in secret; and as soon as one is found, I'll fire the RM on the spot and instantly install the new person in his place. I'll act with lightening speed so that the RM has no time to think. He will, therefore, be unable to take his team with him!" The consultant probed the GM further, "How would you describe The RM's behavior so far?" The GM replied spontaneously, "Oh! He is clearly blackmailing us!" The consultant enquired: "How would your RM interpret your action, once reality of what you did dawned on him?" The GM stumbled and muttered, "What does it matter?"

At this point it is worth remembering that your will to lead must never be divorced from ethical considerations. In this instance the GM had thought of taking a convenient 'tit-for-tat'

approach, making him no better than the RM. If you play 'chess' with your people, they'll do the same with you! You must not play games with people if you seriously wish to run your business on sustainable lines, based on foundations of trust and integrity.

The consultant reminded the GM of his company's newly adopted mission statement and re-focused his attention on its first line: "*Seeking Allah's pleasure in all that we do.*" The GM's thinking clearly contradicted "Allah's pleasure". In light of this, the consultant suggested that if the GM wanted to proceed along the 'tit-for-tat' approach, he would be well advised to issue a circular to all staff stating that this line in the mission statement was proving to be too much of a burden for the company to live up to in its everyday decision-making, and is henceforth being removed. Thankfully, the GM was unwilling to follow this advice. His reason: "It doesn't feel right!"

On seeing this, the consultant shared the lessons he had learned, that very day, from Badr, Ouhd and Khandak, and advised the GM: "Tell your RM plainly that you cannot accept his request for higher pay and explain your reasons. The RM would leave the company or stay. That'll be his call. The team will either go with him or remain with the company. You'll win either way. What's the point of having people on board whom you do not trust? If the team remains, even after the RM's departure, you know you have the right people whom you can depend on. If they leave,

all the better for you! They will save you from engaging in an expensive witch-hunt to identify and sack disloyal elements...They will simply walk out of your life! And if they do, you will end up having a clean company. In a matter of weeks, a new team can be hired and trained, and they will at least deliver 70% of budget this year and exceed expectations in the years that follow!" And so, it was. The GM exercised his will to lead and acted with his own conviction, on sound and principled advice received. The RM left, while his team remained! The GM's fears were unfounded.

It was delightful to see Barack Obama, in January 2008, win the Democratic leadership race in Iowa. He spoke with courage and conviction. His willingness to lead was clear from the way he walked, stood, and spoke. People saw his will to lead, and this led to him to his victory. He boldly described his vision and outlined his grand and unifying strategy for America. It was refreshing to watch this young man, beaming with confidence and optimism, inspiring the nation through his oratory. Of course, time will tell, when and if he makes it to the White House. Here are a few extracts from his historic speech³ that echo his will to lead:

"The time has come for a President who will be honest about the choices and the challenges we face; who will listen to you and learn from you even when we

3

http://www.barackobama.com/2008/01/03/remarks_of_senator_barack_obama_39.php

disagree; who won't just tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to know." Later, he took on the cynics and said, "Hope is the bedrock of this nation; the belief that our destiny will not be written for us, but by us; by all those men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is; who have the courage to remake the world as it should be." As he thanked his supporters he expressed: "This was the moment when we tore down barriers that have divided us for too long - when we rallied people of all parties and ages to a common cause; when we finally gave Americans who'd never participated in politics a reason to stand up and to do so. This was the moment when we finally beat back the politics of fear, and doubt, and cynicism; the politics where we tear each other down instead of lifting this country up. This was the moment."

Your will to lead will be demonstrated by you putting your neck on the line, by you daring to speak from your heart about what you care about deeply, and by you taking responsibility for the outcomes you promise to deliver.

Koestenbaum⁴, in his search for a new language of effective leadership, leaves us with a profound question: "How to reconcile the often-brutal realities of business with basic human values in order to create a new language of effective leadership?"

-O-

⁴ From the article, Do You Have The Will To Lead? by Polly Labarre. Published in Fast Company, Issue No. 32. Feb 2000