

LEADERSHIP & PERSISTENCE: THE LESSON OF BAMBOO

SOONER OR LATER, LEADERS CONFRONT THE THREE HARD TRUTHS OF PERSISTENCE.

To review:

- (1) Initial success is no guarantee of future success.
- (2) There are no shortcuts to enduring success.
- (3) Life is hard so those who want to succeed must work hard.

NOTHING GOOD COMES EASY OR FAST. LIFE IS HARD AND THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY IS DOUBLY HARD.

Meaningful accomplishments demand nothing short of brute perseverance and hard work, usually in the face of longer-than-expected delays and crushing disappointments. In fact, it's not possible to lead effectively apart from the genius of persistence.

In his epic work *Columbus*, James Russell Lowell reminds us of the necessity of persistence in accomplishing any difficult and important endeavor.

"Endurance is the crowning quality, and patience all the passion of great hearts."

It's obvious but nevertheless difficult to embrace. When it comes to leading well over time, persistence is at a premium.

IN THE MIDST OF DISCOURAGEMENT AND DELAY, I INVITE LEADERS TO DRAW SOME ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE UNUSUAL GROWTH PATTERN OF THE BAMBOO PLANT.

THE LESSON OF BAMBOO

We are all familiar with bamboo. This largest member of the grass family grows in warm or tropical regions where it often reaches 100 feet in height. Bamboo is native to the southern climates of North America (the kind we use for fishing poles) and grows from fifteen to twenty-five feet.

Like all plants, the health and growth of bamboo is determined by its root system (bamboo roots are called rhizomes). But bamboo has a unique growth pattern. The root system grows as an underground colony (the plants do not grow alone), storing vital nutrients that eventually produce above ground growth in the form of the familiar bamboo cane (the technical term is a culm).

To the untrained eye recently planted bamboo appears to be doing nothing, as there is no visible above ground growth after year one, year two or year three. However, underground the plant's maturing root system is busy developing, gathering nutrients and preparing to explode with new growth at the designated time, typically the fourth spring.

THE LEADERSHIP LESSON

The growth pattern of bamboo illustrates the necessity persistence in leadership. The time frame for the growth of bamboo—at least above ground growth—is not measured in weeks or months or even a single growing season. It is measured in years. The underground process of developing a root system, while unspectacular and hidden from view, is nonetheless vital to the health and growth of the bamboo plant. Bamboo takes time to produce results. Similarly, leadership results take time.

MUCH LIKE THE GROWTH PATTERN OF BAMBOO, LEADERS TYPICALLY EXPERIENCE A TIME DELAY BETWEEN PLANTING IN THE FORM OF TAKING PRUDENT, DECISIVE ACTION, AND SEEING THE “ABOVE GROUND GROWTH” OF CONCRETE LEADERSHIP RESULTS.

While leaders and the organizations they serve would, of course, prefer it took less time, it's impossible to speed up the growth process. While decisive leadership acts are necessary—leaders must indeed plant—valued outcomes typically “ripen by degrees,” and eventually arrive only with the passing of the months or even years. Like bamboo, the growing season may be much longer than we envision.

While we indeed reap what we sow, we don't usually reap when we sow. As Renaissance author and father of deductive reasoning Sir Francis Bacon put it, “In all negotiations of difficulties, a man may not look to sow and reap at once; but must prepare business, and so ripen it by degrees.” “Ripening it by degrees” means that leaders must keep doing the right things in the delay between sowing and reaping knowing that “above ground results” will eventually come, even if it takes until the fourth spring.

Nelson Mandela was an avid gardener in prison. He had decades to ponder the relationship between gardening and the larger, leadership struggle in which he was engaged. In his biography *The Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela reflected,

In some ways, I saw the garden as a metaphor for certain aspects of my life. A leader must also tend his garden; he, too, plants seeds, and then watches, cultivates, and harvests the result. Like the gardener, a leader must take responsibility for what he cultivates; he must mind his work, try to repel enemies, preserve what can be preserved, and eliminate what cannot succeed” (p. 490).

Much like the growth pattern of bamboo, leaders typically experience a time delay between planting in the form of taking prudent, decisive action, and seeing the “above ground growth” of concrete leadership results.

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