

Popularity Mechanics

My ten-year-old daughter is learning about the parliamentary system in school. To bring the subject to life, her teacher held a mock election for Prime Minister of Canada. My daughter decided she wanted to run and, given that her teachers continually point out her leadership qualities to me, I believed she had a pretty good chance of winning. She prepared a speech, polished her shoes, and looked forward to telling her class members how she planned to change the country. As I dropped her off at school on election day, I wished her luck. “Thanks Mom,” she said, “but I won’t win. Jenny’s more popular than I am.”

Later that day, she confirmed that Jenny had indeed won the election. While my daughter was fine with the outcome—had, in fact, enjoyed the experience as a whole—it got me thinking. At the tender age of 10, she understood and accepted the connection between popularity and leadership in her world. To what extent, I wondered, does this connection apply in the workplace? Can we look past popularity to other attributes in a leader? Should we?

How many times have you heard the phrase, “leadership is not a popularity contest”? I’ve uttered it myself countless times. But is that adage actually true? An unpopular political leader does not remain a leader for long. A CEO unpopular with his or her shareholders will be looking for a new job in short order; someone who is unpopular with employees is rarely able to move the organization toward its vision in any great measure. Can you even call yourself a leader if no one wants to follow you?

So let’s debunk the myth. Leadership is indeed a popularity contest—at least in part. But I believe the key to effective leadership lies in understanding the basis for that popularity.

Research tells us that one of the key differentiators of leaders who are perceived as effective is their demonstrated concern for others. The simple fact is that we’re all attracted to people who pay attention to us. When our leaders focus on our needs and interests, we take notice. So I tell the leaders I work with to get over themselves. Get over yourself and others will get behind you. By paying attention, you gain the license to lead.

You might be thinking, that’s all well and good when things are running smoothly but what about crunch time? I’ve certainly seen leaders make tough decisions that have incited mutiny. But I’ve also known many leaders who have driven some tough decisions through their organization without losing their popularity. How do they do it? How do they impose budget cutbacks, salary reductions or lay-offs and still remain popular? It comes back to interest in others. If you have to make a decision that could adversely affect people, you need to get even more interested in them. If you can find a way to connect your vision to their values, you can position that tough decision in a way that they can make sense of it and perhaps even get behind it.

So what advice will I give my daughter, a budding leader who wants to change the world? Get genuinely interested in the people you want to lead and they’ll get genuinely interested in you.

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