

What Michelangelo and Michelle Obama Can Teach Us About Leadership

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By Richard Mirabile, Ph.D.

Rewind to the 16th century. The Renaissance

One of the most celebrated artists in all of recorded history, Michelangelo Buonarroti, is purported to have once said that he did not “*create*” sculptures, rather, he merely “*removed what was on the surface to reveal what was hidden underneath.*” Hold that thought!

Fast forward to 2012. The Democratic National Convention.

In case you think this is some clever way to proclaim my support for one political party or another, rest easy. This is an observation on what I think may have been one of the most profound statements about leadership that I’ve heard in the past twenty years. During Michelle Obama’s speech at the convention, she said, “*Being President doesn’t change you, it reveals who you are!*”

I think we can all agree that while Michelangelo probably didn’t write her speech, perhaps the speechwriter who did has a day job as a sculptor. In any event, Michelle Obama’s words resonated very deeply. What struck me the most was how clearly and elegantly her statement described what the pundits have been trying to say about leadership for the past fifty years.

As both a student and teacher of leadership, I consider myself pretty well versed with what scholars and practitioners have been telling us for decades about this subject. They generally describe it in terms of character traits, competencies, behaviors, and what successful and unsuccessful leaders do that warrants categorizing them in one camp or the other. Nothing

particularly wrong with these descriptions, but after twenty or thirty years of essentially redundant messages, nothing particularly new in these descriptions either.

Don't misinterpret the point here. This is not intended to minimize the important work of those dedicated professionals. They've succeeded in telling us what separates good leaders from great leaders, and have carefully described what a profile of successful leadership looks like. Indeed, their collective efforts have painted a reasonably consistent picture of what we generally refer to as leadership today.

However, to extend the metaphor, perhaps another way to think about leadership is to approach it the way Michelangelo probably approached his craft. To produce his most majestic works, he had to first believe that there was something beneath the surface, something worth uncovering. With that mindset as his internal canvas, he then had to systematically remove everything that was preventing what was hidden underneath to become visible. Finally, through deliberate, sometimes gentle, sometimes more forceful actions, he eventually enabled the finished product to be revealed. And what magnificent treasures they are!

In almost all sectors of life, this metaphor for leadership is applicable. As mentors, coaches, bosses and teachers, we should constantly be asking ourselves questions that increase the impact of our work. Questions such as: What can I do to uncover the leadership potential in those I influence? What guidance can I offer, what questions can I pose, and what experiences can I provide that would help to uncover each person's hidden talent?

Working to reveal what is present, but perhaps not yet visible, requires a certain belief system, one that drives the right kind of behavior. It doesn't matter if we're sculpting or developing leadership talent. Simply stated, what we believe influences what we do. With respect to leadership potential, if we choose to accept what we see on the surface, then we and those we support may never see the value of what lies hidden underneath.

When Michelangelo looked at a piece of stone, he might have asked himself this question: "If I carefully remove this stone's exterior, what treasure lies hidden underneath?" For those of us charged with the development of leadership talent, the question *we* should be asking is: "What can I do to uncover this person's greatest strengths that have not yet had an opportunity to be revealed?" Perhaps with such a mindset, we will be able to see David in the stone even before he becomes visible.

Suggested reading

"Seeing David in the Stone", James B. Swartz & Joseph E. Swartz