

9-13-2009

Confidence Key to Leadership

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves

Recommended Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Confidence Key to Leadership" (2009). *Ask Gleaves*. Paper 2.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Confidence Key to Leadership

As a student and future leader, I'd like to know what you find to be the most important qualities of leadership?

By *Gleaves Whitney*

The most important quality you need as a future leader is belief in yourself -- belief you can lead. A Grand Valley State University education is designed to instill just that self-confidence and to develop the thoughtfulness and skills to do so.

Recall our mission: educating students to shape (lead) their lives, their professions and their societies.

Because of the support of President Thomas J. Haas and many others at GVSU, we are becoming Michigan's "Leadership University."

At the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, we are expanding our Leadership Academy to serve students and staff who are interested in developing as leaders. The first step is to overcome a myth. How many times have you heard there are two kinds of people -- followers and leaders?

The statement is both true and false. People change, have epiphanies and grow through setbacks. You may not be a leader today, but some challenge or injustice may launch you on the quest to lead tomorrow. The key is the realization you have passion, fire in the belly and the ambition (hopefully noble) to leave your scent on the world.

There have been some spectacular examples in world history of people awakening to their capacity to lead. Moses, a Hebrew-Egyptian prince, was not much of a leader as a young adult. There is evidence he could not control his temper (he murdered a man in a fit of anger) and stammered so badly he needed a spokesman (his brother Aaron).

Yet once Moses understood his mission to found a new nation for the Hebrews, he was unstoppable. The leader of the Exodus, he became one of humankind's greatest liberators.

Another liberator, Abraham Lincoln, would become known as the Great Emancipator due to his contributions to freeing the slaves. However, only one decade before he earned this accolade, he thought his political career was over and was reasonably content practicing law and making money in Springfield, Ill.

Passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 so alarmed him that he was suddenly consumed with the passion to re-enter politics to keep slavery from spreading and put it on the road to extinction.

Queen Elizabeth I of England overcame numerous obstacles in a "man's world" to become one of the most powerful monarchs of all time. From an early age, the so-called Virgin Queen possessed the inner confidence she could lead, and she was smart about building relationships and picking her fights. In the U.S., she is honored to this day in Virginia, the state named for her.

As he neared 40 years of age, Ulysses S. Grant had been out of the army a long time and was unsuccessful in most of the business endeavors he tried. When the Civil War broke out, he practically had to beg to receive a commission to re-enter the army. There were rumors he had a drinking problem. The war department initially did not want him.

Yet he eventually emerged as the Union's most successful general and cornered the Confederate army under Robert E. Lee to end the war.

As he reached his midlife, Dwight Eisenhower was prepared to retire as a lieutenant colonel, frustrated by having never fought in a war. But Adolph Hitler's aggression in World War II radically altered the trajectory of Eisenhower's career, and he became one of the most celebrated military heroes of the 20th century.

Sometimes leaders discover their passion to fight injustice in unexpected places. Rosa Parks awakened to her mission to lead on a bus in Montgomery, Ala. For Gandhi, it was the humiliating experience of being thrown off a train in South Africa because he was "colored."

The lesson is, never count yourself or anybody else out. Today's follower may be tomorrow's leader, and today's leader may be tomorrow's follower.

Throughout history, the unlikeliest people (Moses, Lincoln, Elizabeth I, Grant, Gandhi, Parks) have become hugely important leaders, while those who seemed destined for the highest positions of leadership (Gen. George Patton in World War II and Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Korea) were ultimately humbled to follow.

The question for you to answer is: What will you lead?



This essay originally appeared in the *Grand Valley Lanthorn* on September 13, 2009.



[Read more Answers](#)

Gleaves Whitney is the director of Grand Valley's Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies. [Ask your question.](#)

(Question from Laura Miller, senior, Hospitality and Tourism Management major at GVSU)