

# The More Things Change . . .

David Campbell

**R**ecently, before retiring from CCL, I was cleaning out my files and came across a piece I wrote in 1994 but never published.

I had been writing a regular column called *Inklings* for *LiA*'s predecessor, *Issues & Observations* (now the name of a standing column in *LiA*), and I may have intended this long-lost piece for this venue. I wrote sixty-one *Inklings* columns over eighteen years; this one could have just been misplaced or, as I often write down my thoughts as a way to help me understand what I am thinking, it is possible I never intended to make it public.

The piece contains a series of observations on leadership, all of which I find today are still relevant. Consequently, it seems worth reviving even though it was written fourteen years ago. There is no doubt that much about leadership has changed and continues to change; at the same time there is also much that is perpetual.

Following is the text of that piece from what in retrospect seems a not-so-distant time.

## TURNING TWENTY-ONE

1994 marks my twenty-first year at CCL. In earlier times twenty-one was a mark of maturity; you could vote, drink, sign contracts, join the Army, and get married—all without seeking permission from anyone else. Although the maturity benchmark has been modified somewhat as far as the

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*Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.*

passage of a required number of years, twenty-one is still often perceived as an adult milestone, tied to some ritual of coming of age.

Reaching this milestone in my career has allowed me to have the following undocumented opinions, at

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least in the area of leadership, where I have spent the previous two decades.

Consequently, here are twenty-one observations that I am asking the reader to accept on faith or, perhaps, just on common sense.

1. Leadership can be taught, or at least learned. I am also fairly certain that it can be stomped on fatally.

2. A definition of leadership that makes sense to me is, "Actions that focus resources to create desirable opportunities." I have been using this definition for years, but no one else seems to be impressed by it.

3. The world will inevitably focus on the frailty of the leader. If a leader scores a 9 on a 10-point scale, the 10 percent gap between reality and perfection will be what draws public

attention—but, as the English say, better a diamond with a single flaw than a perfect pebble.

4. Leadership is intoxicating. Following is a section of a review I wrote in 1979 of a book that purported to be dealing with the cutting edge of leadership:

*This is a bland book, neither good nor bad, just boring. It is a product of an academic symposium, and the authors are incestuous professors who write to, at, for, with, against, and about each other.*

*To be a leader, to accumulate and exercise power, is one of life's most intoxicating, frustrating, exhilarating, and punishing activities. Leaders have clout; they influence events; they make, spend, and manipulate thousands, millions, billions of dollars; they determine the course of freeways, institutions, and countries; and they make decisions about what we can see on TV, whether there will be gas at the pumps, what music or movies we are offered, and which borders we can cross without hassles. The smell of power surrounding them attracts groupies, hate mail, Lear jets, adoration, lawsuits, lovers, leather-covered upholstery, suicidal thoughts, and a vast array of actual and vicarious climaxes. This book does not even faintly touch on such intense topics; indeed, one has the impression that writers of such vivid prose would be drummed out of the academy.*

5. Creative leadership is distasteful to most organizations; it almost always creates unwelcome turbulence. The status quo will usually

reign or, perhaps, suffocate. Leaders who attempt to be creative either have to be brilliant or be completely in control. It helps if they are both.

6. People in charge will hang on too long.

7. Sexual appetites will intrude. (Read the newspapers from any random decade.)

8. Demographic categories are inordinately difficult to deal with. Race, gender, religion, ethnicity, geographic location, and perhaps even age and physical stature have little direct relevance to leadership, but just try leading people who are in a different demographic category than you are.

9. Two basic dimensions of leadership—task orientation and relationship orientation—have constantly appeared and reappeared in the leadership research literature in the past forty years. Both people and productivity are important.

10. There is almost no good experimental research on leadership. For example, to my knowledge, no organization has ever said: “Look, we have fifty branch offices. Let’s put our best men in charge of twenty-five of them, and our best women in charge of the other twenty-five, and see what happens.” In this sense, virtually nothing written about leadership has any solid, scientific, “laboratory-like” foundation. Of course, the same can be said about war, love, religion, and parenthood, but that does not stop us from pontificating about them.

11. Ambition is terribly important; to be a successful leader one has to dearly want to make a difference. Leaders who are not fueled by some internal sense of urgency are usually called managers.

12. Technical knowledge about the area being led is, at a minimum, useful, often critical.

13. The most brilliant leaders are those who make intuitive decisions that turn out, when all the facts are in, to fit the facts.

14. For advice, given the choice, leaders will turn to other leaders rather

than to experts. Leaders have trouble granting credibility to anyone who has not walked a mile in their Guccis.

15. Sooner or later, and it is often sooner, almost all organizations will demonstrate dysfunctionality. Even the simplest organizational tasks escalate in complexity over time, creating either bad feelings or poor performance. Simply assigning parking places, getting the coffee pot cleaned daily, or asking someone to cover the switchboard over lunch will eventually lead to friction.

16. Poor leadership is far more visible from below than from above,

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which means that in most organizations, those responsible for evaluating leaders—usually their superiors—are poorly positioned to do so.

17. Few organizations have figured out how to allocate the rewards for good leadership fairly, rationally, and politically acceptably.

18. Most leaders do not have anywhere near the power that they think they do, nor that their subordinates think they do. Still, their visibility alone creates symbolic power that should not be underestimated. Even so, just because you think you are in charge, and just because the people below you think you are in charge, that does not necessarily mean you can get the trains to run on time.


19. Fascinating as the concept is, I cannot think of any way of estimating whether the good done by out-

standing leaders is equal to, or more or less than, the damage done by poor ones. In my own life, the good done by outstanding leaders has far, far outweighed the damage done by the bad ones, but perhaps that is because I have usually been in situations where I could essentially ignore the bad ones.

20. Humor is potent in leadership settings but not one leader in a hundred uses it well. Ronald Reagan was a wonderful role model for humor in leadership. In the aftermath of the 1981 assassination attempt on him outside the Hilton Washington hotel, he was rushed to George Washington University Hospital and, badly bleeding, was laid on an operating table. Looking up at the surgeons hovering over him, he said, “Gosh, I hope you guys are all Republicans.” Liberal or conservative, we can all use more laughter.

21. Leadership is physically hard work, requiring long hours, wrenching decisions, unexpected crises, exhausting travel, complicated agendas, and never-ending social demands. Those who are not physically robust will seldom rise to the top.

## STILL PERTINENT

So there they are: twenty-one leadership observations, collected over an earlier twenty-one years, that still seem applicable today. I have an unsettling feeling that I am now accumulating new, insightful observations more slowly than before, perhaps documenting what I said earlier: many leaders hang on too long. 

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*David Campbell is the CCL H. Smith Richardson Senior Fellow Emeritus. His honors include an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from the University of Colorado, the 2001 Distinguished Professional Contributions Award from the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and the 2007 Distinguished Alumnus Award from Iowa State University.*

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