

Not Leadership Material? Good. The World Needs Followers.

The glorification of leadership skills, especially in college admissions, has emptied leadership of its meaning.

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In 1934, a young woman named Sara Pollard applied to Vassar College. In those days, parents were asked to fill out a questionnaire, and Sara's father described her, truthfully, as "more a follower type than a leader."

The school accepted Sara, explaining that it had enough leaders.

It's hard to imagine this happening today. No father in his right mind (if the admissions office happened to ask him!) would admit that his child was a natural follower; few colleges would welcome one with open arms. Today we prize leadership skills above all, and nowhere more than in college admissions. As Penny Bach Evins, the head of St. Paul's School for Girls, an independent school in Maryland, told me, "It seems as if higher ed is looking for alphas, but the doers and thinkers in our schools are not always in front leading."

Harvard's application informs students that its mission is "to educate our students to be citizens and citizen-leaders for society." Yale's website advises applicants that it seeks "the leaders of their generation"; on Princeton's site, "leadership activities" are first among equals on a list of characteristics for would-be students to showcase. Even Wesleyan, known for its artistic culture, was found by one study to evaluate applicants based on leadership potential.

If college admissions offices show us whom and what we value, then we seem to think that the ideal society is composed of Type A's. This is perhaps unsurprising, even if these examples come from highly competitive institutions. It's part of the American DNA to celebrate those who rise above the crowd. And in recent decades, the meteoric path to leadership of youthful garage- and dorm-dwellers, from Steve Jobs to Mark Zuckerberg, has made king of the hill status seem possible for every 19-year-old. So now we have high school students vying to be president of as many clubs as they can. It's no longer enough to be a member of the student council; now you have to run the school.

Yet a well-functioning student body — not to mention polity — also needs followers. It needs team players. And it needs those who go their own way.

It needs leaders who are called to service rather than to status.

Admissions officers will tell you that their quest for tomorrow's leaders is based on a desire for positive impact, to make the world a better place. I think they mean what they say.

But many students I've spoken with read "leadership skills" as a code for authority and dominance and define leaders as those who "can order other people around." And according to one prominent Ivy League professor, those students aren't wrong; leadership, as defined by the admissions process, too often "seems to be restricted to political or business power." She says admissions officers fail to define leadership as "making advances in solving mathematical problems" or "being the best poet of the century."

Whatever the colleges' intentions, the pressure to lead now defines and constricts our children's adolescence. One young woman told me about her childhood as a happy and enthusiastic reader, student and cellist — until freshman year of high school, when "college applications loomed on the horizon, and suddenly, my every activity was held up against the holy grail of 'leadership,' " she recalled. "And everyone knew," she added, "that it was not the smart people, not the creative people, not the thoughtful people or decent human beings that scored the application letters and the scholarships, but the leaders. It seemed no activity or accomplishment meant squat unless it was somehow connected to leadership."

This young woman tried to overhaul her personality so she would be selected for a prestigious leadership role as a “freshman mentor.” She made the cut, but was later kicked out of the program because she wasn’t outgoing enough. At the time, she was devastated. But it turned out that she’d been set free to discover her true calling, science. She started working after school with her genetics teacher, another behind-the-scenes soul. She published her first scientific paper when she was 18, and won the highest scholarship her university has to offer, majoring in biomedical engineering and cello.

Our elite schools overemphasize leadership partly because they’re preparing students for the corporate world, and they assume that this is what businesses need. But a discipline in organizational psychology, called “followership,” is gaining in popularity. Robert Kelley, a professor of management and organizational behavior, defined the term in a 1988 Harvard Business Review article, in which he listed the qualities of a good follower, including being committed to “a purpose, principle or person outside themselves” and being “courageous, honest and credible.” It’s an idea that the military has long taught.

Recently, other business thinkers have taken up this mantle. Some focus on the “romance of leadership” theory, which causes us to inaccurately attribute all of an organization’s success and failure to its leader, ignoring its legions of followers. Adam Grant, who has written several books on what drives people to succeed, says that the most frequent question he gets from readers is how to contribute when they’re not in charge but have a suggestion and want to be heard. “These are not questions asked by leaders,” he told me. “They’re fundamental questions of followership.”

Team players are also crucial. My sons are avid soccer players, so I spend a lot of time watching the “beautiful game.” The thing that makes it beautiful is not leadership, though an excellent coach is essential. Nor is it the swoosh of the ball in the goal, though winning is noisily celebrated. It is instead the intricate ballet of patterns and passes, of each player anticipating the other’s strengths and needs, each shining for the brief instant that he has the ball before passing it to a teammate or losing it to an opponent.

We also rely as a society, much more deeply than we realize, on the soloists who forge their own paths. We see those figures in all kinds of pursuits: in the sciences; in sports like tennis, track and figure skating; and in the arts. Art and science are about many things that make life worth living, but they are not, at their core, about leadership. Helen Vendler, a professor of English at Harvard, published an essay in which she encouraged the university to attract more artists and not expect them “to become leaders.” Some of those students will become leaders in the arts, she wrote — conducting an orchestra, working to reinstate the arts in schools — “but one can’t quite picture Baudelaire pursuing public service.”

Perhaps the biggest disservice done by the outsize glorification of “leadership skills” is to the practice of leadership itself — it hollows it out, it empties it of meaning. It attracts those who are motivated by the spotlight rather than by the ideas and people they serve. It teaches students to be a leader for the sake of being in charge, rather than in the name of a cause or idea they care about deeply. The difference between the two states of mind is profound. The latter belongs to transformative leaders like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi; the former to — well, we’ve all seen examples of this kind of leadership lately.

If this seems idealistic, consider the status quo: students jockeying for leadership positions as résumé padders. “They all want to be president of 50 clubs,” a faculty adviser at a New Jersey school told me. “They don’t even know what they’re running for.”

It doesn’t have to be this way.

What if we said to college applicants that the qualities we’re looking for are not leadership skills, but excellence, passion and a desire to contribute beyond the self? This framework would encompass exceptional team captains and class presidents. But it wouldn’t make leadership the be-all and end-all.

What if we said to our would-be leaders, “Take this role only if you care desperately about the issue at hand”?

And what if we were honest with ourselves about what we value? If we’re looking for the students and citizens most likely to attain wealth and power, let’s

admit it. Then we can have a frank debate about whether that is a good idea.

But if instead we seek a society of caring, creative and committed people, and leaders who feel called to service rather than to stature, then we need to do a better job of making that clear.

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