

# What Are the Important Qualities Needed for Demonstrating Leadership?

By Yoshihiro Hashimoto

## Distinct Features of the Modern World

Today, in the 21st century, the world in which we live and work has shown the various limits of the capitalist and democratic systems, including the huge expansion and globalization of systems and organizations, a culture within organizations that puts the highest priority on the organization and efficiency, and an individualistic and utilitarian sense of values among the people who support those institutions. We have reached a major turning point, as we are also facing a variety of challenges in terms of management and leadership, including increasing complexity and discontinuous change, an accelerating pace of change, and the diversification of values. In this kind of environment, when demonstrating leadership it becomes important to determine how to perceive these changes and what qualities need to be developed, and how to make that development possible.

## Perspective of the Aspen Institute

Since its establishment in the United States in 1950, the Aspen Institute has trained many leaders through dialogue around the liberal arts, and the classics in particular, to consider how to view the world in which we live and be able to formulate prescriptive measures, based on our awareness of issues and experience.

## The Danger of Trivialization

In 1949, soon after the end of World War II, a 20-day conference was held in Aspen, Colorado, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who symbolized humanity in so many senses. The conference brought together more than 2,000 leading intellectuals and cultural figures from around the world, regardless of which side their country had been on during the war.

Among the attendees, the one who is said to have made the greatest impression on the audience was the young chancellor of the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins. In an address titled "Seeking the Civilization of Dialogue" he explained, "The most unexpected characteristic of our time is the universal trivialization of life." He went on to explore in depth three problems related to trivialization.

The first problem is the trivialization of how people work and live. He noted, "The rising power of the enormous, mysterious,

bureaucratic state and of the equally enormous, mysterious, bureaucratic industrial corporation has removed the control over the life of the individual," and went on to warn of the dangers people face from the society that had emerged and the management of huge organizations.

The second is the loss of culture and personal interaction as a result of excessive specialization. On this point, he said, "The successes of specialization have led to specialism, a state of mind that favors technical training at the expense of liberal culture and stops communication by cutting off man from man." He went on to question the benefit of specialist knowledge if a man is uneducated in other fields and ignorant of many things. He warned against producing large numbers of leaders through excessive specialization.

The third problem is the breakdown of communication and community life, and the decline of thought. As a person who thought about education, he also spoke frankly about the crisis in education stating that the "general current conception... together with the advance of specialism and vocationalism, undermined the foundations of communication and community life. The decay of liberal education, which is the education of the independent thinking man in the tradition in which we live, has cut off thinking men from one another and from the great thinkers of the past."

At this time, Hutchins was already warning of the dangers of a society built on the combination of extremely large organizations, excessive specialization, and decision-making by uneducated specialists and leaders.

## Liberal Arts & Dialogue as Prescriptions

What prescriptions, then, does the Aspen Institute propose for these various problems? In a word, we see light in the power of the liberal arts and dialogue. There are many definitions of the essence of the liberal arts and dialogue, however, so let us proceed by clarifying our understanding. Hints can be found in the words of the Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset, who also attended the 1949 conference and was a major inspiration for the establishment of the Aspen Institute.

## The Liberal Arts

In his 1930 book *Mission of the University* (translated into Japanese by Tadashi Inoue, 1968) Gasset has this to say about the

meaning of the liberal arts (culture): life is a chaos, a tangled and confused jungle in which man is lost. But his mind reacts against the sensation of bewilderment: he labors to find ways through the woods, in the form of clear, firm ideas concerning the universe and positive convictions about the nature of things. This ensemble or system of these ideas is culture in the true sense of the term; it is precisely the opposite of external ornament. Culture is what saves human life from being mere disaster; it is what enables man to live a life which is something above meaningless tragedy or inward disgrace.

If we apply this to leadership, the fact that a leader is someone who makes important decisions means that when they are unsure, the liberal arts (culture) act as a signpost and provide support. This is a very interesting definition of the meaning of the liberal arts.

## Dialogue

Another important concept is dialogue in the broad sense. Let us look at the Goethe school's concept of dialogue and the foundation that makes it possible to have dialogue with deeper meaning. First, according to Goethe, communication is the foundation of the human community. Decades before people dreamed of the projects, he is said to have talked about the interaction that the Panama Canal and Suez Canal would bring about. Goethe saw communication as an important bridge through which the human community could expand and grow. This is related to Goethe's thinking about the reciprocal distribution of the world's literature; the idea that global interaction would lead to the further growth of humanity.

According to Goethe, the lack of contact at that time meant that people could not sufficiently know what was going on in the world, and could not develop a common basis of sentiment or shared objectives, and projects like the Panama Canal and Suez Canal would be practical, ideal bridges for bringing enlightened people together. This was Goethe's grand image of dialogue and civilization.

Hutchins also talks about dialogue. "In one good Goethean world the Civilization of the Dialogue is communication. The Civilization of the Dialogue presupposes mutual respect and understanding; it does not presuppose agreement.... The common bond is the bond of faith. Goethe's faith in goodness, his faith in humanity, his faith in the goodness of humanity is the solid ground beneath the feet of those who refuse to be drawn into the morass of cynicism and despair. This faith is a creative force, a force that can make us better than we are and that will lead others to have trust in us and to become better than they have been. Through this faith we may lay the foundations of the Civilization of the Dialogue."

## The Qualities Sought in Leaders

Based on an awareness of the issues and prescriptive concepts outlined above, I would next like to introduce the three qualities required of leaders and methods for cultivating those qualities as put forth by the Aspen Institute Japan.

The first quality is deep insight and values to make decisions and act as a leader. Nagayo Honma, professor emeritus of the University

of Tokyo and former deputy president of the Aspen Institute Japan who edited and compiled the readings for liberal arts seminars, said that the most important thing for a leader is deep insight into human nature and the essence of human relationships. The values we refer to include views on things including people, nature, the world, history and the state, legal consciousness, life and death, and religion, but the important values related to human beings from an elevated perspective can be learned through things like philosophy and literature expressed in various forms in literature from all times and places. This leads to the acceptance of diversity and humility as a leader.

The second quality is the ability to broaden one's perspective toward a diverse world, and to build principles and ideals. Leaders must deal with various difficulties and problems, guide people, and move forward themselves without breaking. To do this, they must maintain an open mind, have a broad view of the world, and look at the world they see and feel with their own eyes. From this perspective, or from the second-hand perspective and experience they gain from the liberal arts literature left to them by their predecessors, they must find something they truly believe in, something they yearn for from their soul, something they can call a philosophy or an ideal. When a leader has a clear idea of what they themselves want to do for society and what they and their organization want to achieve together, this gives them strong determination and energizes their soul, and makes the leader attractive as a person and able to move people. The literature of the liberal arts contains many hints for building one's own convictions and aspirations.

The third important quality is the ability to be introspective and to engage in dialogue. As noted above, there are problems with the paradigm of gathering information over a long time, formulating large-scale plans, and unilaterally guiding and managing. It is therefore becoming ever more important for leaders at all levels to be able to engage in dialogue with their coworkers, their followers, and society.

## How These Qualities Are Cultivated

The seminars offered by the Aspen Institute encompass dialogue at three levels – dialogue with the author, dialogue with other people, and dialogue with oneself. Participants read liberal arts texts, and by discussing them with one another and reflecting on them, they learn experientially, but there are several empirical points with regard to this process of absorbing the liberal arts and engaging in dialogue.

The first is that when reading liberal arts texts, the reader must not only understand the content, but also consider the time in which the author lived, and develop a deep awareness of their awareness of issues and attitudes toward life. Vicariously experiencing the lives and thinking of authors of classic works, who lived in a different time and place but whose works are still read hundreds of years later, gives us a relative understanding of the world in which we live, and the life of the author gives us great courage.

The second is exposure to new concepts and ways of looking at

things gained through reading these texts. This is called “insight” in English, and new insights allow us to look at the world differently and in greater depth, giving new meaning to our experiences to date and plans for the future.

In addition, classic texts transcend time and space. For example, universal human themes like freedom, equality, community, and efficiency make us think about whether we are more advanced today, and what we should think about for the future. Busy people generally don’t have time to think about these kinds of fundamental questions, but continuously thinking on a fundamental level with an open mind is important for the leaders who will conceive and create the future.

## The Perspective of Business Administration

Finally, I would like to digress somewhat from the Aspen Institute and consider the perspective of business administration. Business administration, which directly confronts the difficulty of managing a huge organization, needs to correct the distortions caused by priority being given to the organization, efficiency, and utility over people, and recently various changes are being seen. In addition, since the beginning of the 21st century we have been seeing additional changes including the diversification of values, increasingly complex environments, discontinuous change, and a significant increase in speed. Given this environment, it is increasingly important for each individual to have their own values and volition, and to make decisions and act independently, and attention is focusing on the need to invest in people with this in mind.

Against the backdrop of this paradigm shift, leadership requires various modifications. I understand this as a return to human nature, and would like to consider modifications from the perspectives of human beings, management, and leaders.

A human perspective means viewing people as individuals with their own thoughts, feelings, and intuition, as opposed to the conventional view of people as a predictable and manageable resource. More than the economic man described in economics as one who acts to maximize their own individual benefit, or the organization man that sociology describes as a cog in an organization, this view sees people as human beings.

In *The Individualized Corporation* (Sumantra Ghoshal and Christopher A. Bartlett, 1997; translated into Japanese by Globis Management Institute, 1999), Ghoshal, a well-known academic who studied management and taught at the London Business School and the European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD), makes three proposals regarding management perspective. The first is to go beyond “strategy” to “purpose”, which asks why my company exists and for what purpose. This means that only after incorporating the purpose of an organization into its strategy will its members have long-term empathy. Next is to go beyond “structure” to “process”, which means that instead of the conventional control of an organization by allocating management resources and capabilities into categories, it is important to design processes for personal relationships and workplace atmospheres, and how people interact with each other, to develop more creative businesses. The third is to

go beyond “system” to “people”, which points out the dangers of relying on internal information systems alone for information sharing and decision-making, and notes the greater importance of creating close-knit, informal personal relationships.

In terms of a leader perspective, recently leaders are said to be wise people who can tell stories, rather than charismatic, and that leaders should be coaches rather than consultants, who are inspirational and influential, instead of being effective communicators. More than giving instructions, this kind of leadership firmly instills the leader’s own vision and gains the trust of members, and provides ongoing support as a coach for the implementation of that vision.

Does it not make sense to look to the liberal arts, which are nothing more than the classic propositions of what human beings are, how they should be viewed, how the mission of a person or organization can be identified, what people require to work comfortably and autonomously, and whether thoughts and ideals are being taken to heart in the true sense, for hints to this consideration of business administration that returns to human nature?

## Conclusion

In this article, I have looked at how to view change, and what qualities need to be cultivated and how to cultivate them, to demonstrate leadership in the current environment based on the many things I have learned through my work at the Aspen Institute. I would like to conclude with the words of Aspen Institute Japan founder Yotaro Kobayashi to leaders, based on his extensive experience as a manager.

He said, “As the specialization, diversification and decentralization, and the resulting trivialization of society advances, and we enjoy comfortable, ultramodern lifestyles, we should not fall into partial optimization limited to narrow ‘technical’ fields, but should always go back to a starting point of asking ‘Why?’ with clear insights and an overall perspective, as we search for how to use the technologies we have acquired to increase the true knowledge of humanity. With their far-off and deep starting point, let us seek food for thought from the classics and take a broad view of the whole world, and combine that thought with the courage and modesty to confront reality directly, and refine our judgment and actions, as well as the pillars of our thought.”

What qualities to cultivate is an important part of demonstrating leadership. There is no doubt that the answer is deep insight, a sense of values, broad perspectives and ideals, and introspection and an ability to engage in dialogue based on the liberal arts. Nevertheless, refining these qualities in the true sense needs to be through actions backed by a solid sense of values, with diligent introspection and dialogue with oneself. I hope that readers will find this article useful.

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