

Inspiring Followership

Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

A recently retired CEO came to see me because he wondered if his early retirement decision had been a mistake. Yes, but that's not the point. I respond viscerally to my clients and as he talked I realized I could work for this man. He would be a tough boss headed in a firm direction, but it would be a great and interesting challenge to go along with him. In other words, he inspired *followership* in me.

As CEO, you will lead an often fractious group of leaders, little kings and queens in their own fiefdoms. They got where they are because they have many of your skills and rock-hard ambition. They are not readily pushed around. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin called it *A Team of Rivals* in her engaging story of how Abraham Lincoln turned the candidates he beat for the 1860 presidential nomination into his Cabinet; an effective one, even as parts of the snaky competition continued. That's your world. Your direct reports believe – as did Lincoln's Chase, Seward, Stanton, and Bates - they should have your job. They know how to slide a Machiavellian sword between shoulders. Lincoln had to build a coalition, as a leader of leaders. So will you.

Below your leaders are the minions who carry the swords and shove the plows. Most of them are happy to fall in step behind someone carrying a banner. You must get an appreciation for how powerful an inspiration you can be and how much performance you can get from a group so enthused by you. What creates this inspiration? Think back to the bosses and mentors you've had who stirred your loyalty and got that extra mile from you. You're likely to think such things as, "He worked my a*! off." "I felt like I could go somewhere with him." "She made me feel like we could take that hill." "He always had his eyes on the prize, but the prize had my name on it, too."

Think about the qualities that prompted the memories: Challenge, expectation, belief, direction, inspiration, sharing rewards. When I recall the best, toughest, driving-est bosses, they cared about me as a person. They might have been vain, perfectionistic, driven, political foxes, but they made me feel special. I never tired of trudging in the imprint their boots made on their particular road to glory.

You believe the CEO position is a powerful one, but the name of that job doesn't mean much. Power is what you get by going for it, by doing what it takes to hold it, but the title means nothing unless someone else accedes power to you. You can be solo and have power over money or technology or ideas. To have power in the workplace, however, you must get people to follow you, whether slavishly or at last. An Afghan proverb says, "If you think you're leading and no one is following you, then you're only taking a walk."

Learn to inspire followership. Leading is about you and the pursuit of your goals; right behind that, it's about your people and how they see themselves in your picture. Always keep them in it.

Rose Jonas, Ph.D., is president of The Jonas Company, consulting in governance, leadership development and employment for privately held businesses.