

Understanding Global Leadership in the Year of the Protester

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Strong global leaders are in demand these days. Take, for instance, the revolutionary waves of protests and demonstrations like the Arab Spring in the Middle East that began in December 2010, and the ongoing Occupy Wall Street and related movements in the U.S. It is no wonder that *Time Magazine* named “The Protester” as its 2011 person of the year. Today’s political, business and social leaders face no shortage of complex issues requiring quick action.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) in Geneva, a non-profit organization that brings together top business and political leaders to work through important world issues, is in the business of analyzing effective global leadership. The WEF runs the Global Leadership Fellows, a three-year program that trains young professionals to be “the next generation of world leaders.” Participants learn from, and work with, diverse world leaders and experts to facilitate common solutions to many of the world’s most pressing issues.

High School Students Can Affect the World

This past summer, a group of Philadelphia high school students with the organization Summer Search spent a few hours at Wharton, meeting with some of these Global Leadership Fellows. They talked about important world issues, says Lewis Nash, a 2011 graduate of Boys Latin High School who is now a freshman at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa. “They told us we need to start interacting,” says Nash, 18. “I thought, ‘We’re young; there’s no way we can impact the world until we get into jobs that are high up on the food chain.’ But then they explained how we could impact the world by [addressing] neighborhood violence. We could go on Facebook or some other social networking site, contact our friends and say that we would all do something to protest the violence in our neighborhoods. I started to see how a little bit of effort by high school students could affect the world.”

Nash also learned the value of knowledge in developing leadership skills. Leaders who have a solid grounding in a number of areas have a good shot at staring down the global challenges and getting people to work together to find solutions, says Gilbert Probst, managing director of the leadership office and academic affairs at the WEF. “Leaders today have to make decisions in a much more complex environment than the one that used to exist,” notes Probst. “Therefore, they need to connect the dots quickly, sometimes with an incomplete study, but with a good enough viewpoint that lets them come to adequate decisions.”

The nature of leadership has not really changed, but “the context in which leadership is exercised has become more complicated,” suggests Ian Rogan, an expert on global leadership who is now part of the North America team at the WEF. “We live in a time where there isn’t a news cycle; there is just a perpetual flow of information,” says Rogan. “To be able to manage that, particularly in a crisis, is much more challenging. As a leader, you need to be able to perform much more quickly but still in a manner that [allows] enough time to think through your decisions.”

One way of doing that is to understand global issues. “Being a full domain leader means being open to different ideas, and being able to integrate multiple perspectives,” says Probst. “You have to have some understanding and integration of multiple dimensions and issues that include ecology, management and society. It’s a matter of being able to identify and integrate all of the stakeholders that may be in different countries and on different continents.”

The challenges don’t end there, he adds. “An effective leader can also coordinate across industries,” Probst says. “At the WEF’s Global Leadership Fellows Program, for example, we bring together people who are not only geographically diverse and show excellent intercultural intelligence, but are from a multiple set of backgrounds, including business, technology, science, public health and other industries — and people from political, academic, social, political and religious areas. The great idea is to get them to take an entrepreneurial, multidisciplinary approach to the global public interest.”

‘Vision-driven, Curious and Highly Motivated’

While leadership fellows themselves are diverse, made up of men and women from dozens of countries with a variety of backgrounds, they do tend to share some common characteristics, he says. “These future global leaders we work with want to improve their organization and others with whom they interact,” Probst says. “You could call them entrepreneurs in the global public interest who want to integrate, not separate. They are vision-driven, curious and highly motivated, and want to constantly expand and apply their knowledge.”

In fact, adds Probst, leadership is a lot more than giving people direction. Instead, he sees it as an interconnection of thought leadership, constituent and forum leadership, personal qualities and people leadership. “Thought leadership involves solving problems in a holistic way, identifying issues and building knowledge,” he says. “Constituent and forum leadership involves building trust, shaping agendas and engaging people.” A leader’s personal qualities will include a results-driven outlook that is balanced by a commitment to values and improvement. The leadership component itself is usually a desire to mobilize people, act in a collaborative manner and manage people, projects and one’s own self.

Today, perhaps as never before, leadership requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural approach, says Probst. “It’s a continuing process that requires dedication,” he says. “But the people who can pursue and understand the global issues and their role as leaders will be the ones who are able to make better-informed decisions and direct activities toward goals that will benefit everyone.”

Related Links

- [Time Person of the Year: The Protester](#)
- [National Youth Leadership Council](#)
- [The World Economic Forum](#)
- [World Economic Forum Global Leadership Fellows](#)
- [Philadelphia Kids Meet with World Economic Forum Global Leadership Fellows](#)
- [Mission Critical: 15 Principles to Help Leaders Meet Their Toughest Challenges](#)

- [Summer Search](#)