
Embracing Leadership in an Era of Activism

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Greta Thunberg has become a voice of change for Generation Z. At age 16, the climate change activist from Sweden has crossed oceans, marched for miles and spearheaded vocal protests and rallies to fight for what she believes: that climate change is real and needs to become a priority among global leaders.

As Thunberg told policy makers during the United Nations Climate Action Summit in September:

“You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you’re doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.”

Thunberg represents the voice of an entire generation that is not afraid to hold leaders accountable – and to expect more from their decision-making, in business, politics and education. Michael Useem, a Wharton management professor who is the director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, recently joined the Knowledge@Wharton radio show on SiriusXM (which has since been discontinued) to discuss how the youth movement is influencing leadership.

Useem urged leaders to recognize the power of the collective youth voice. “There’s a generation that is saying they don’t want to spend their lives making something that is undermining the environment or has a health cost. They want to spend their lives contributing to the condition that we all want to have,” noted Useem. “If you’re thinking about leadership development...The new feature here is listening to the grassroots. They’ve got a different point of view.”

As we listened to Useem’s guidance for business leaders in acknowledging and including the younger generation’s perspective, we wondered how he might also guide leadership development among high school students. What about all those Gen Zers who are inspired by Thunberg’s passion and purpose and also hope to become — as Hollywood star and environmentalist Leonard DiCaprio calls her — “A leader of our time”?

Useem offers this advice from years studying leaders of all kinds:

1. **Commit.** “Decide to get involved,” he says. “A vital element of anybody’s leadership development is to take charge and lead change, and that’s entirely up to you. At the core, leadership entails mobilizing yourself and others to make a difference in the lives of many.”
2. **Learn.** “Leadership is learned in three ways: by serving as a self-directed instructor — reading biographies, and watching other leaders in your school and community; by working with mentors, such as your parents, team coaches, school teachers and community members; and by getting out of your comfort zone so you can take on new agendas and obligations that require leadership from you, and allow you to learn from direct experiences.”
3. **Grow.** While walkouts and protests have characterized recent youth movements in the U.S. and Hong Kong, with a focus on challenging authority, Useem urges leaders-in-training to recognize that leadership comes in many forms. In his book *The Leader’s Checklist*, Useem notes that effective leadership can be learned, and, indeed, should be learned, and that several principles apply to becoming strong leaders. No. 1 on his list: “Having a vision, a strategy, and being able to execute around it.” In an interview with our sister publication,

Knowledge@Wharton, Useem shared the one principle that he feels aspiring leaders often overlook: Honoring the room. “In a discussion with one person, a team, a class, an off-site meeting, before you get off stage, take a moment to tell the people you are with — those who may be ready to follow you — that you know who they are, that you respect what they’re doing and that you’re extremely grateful for their hard work.”