

## Learning to lead

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" Russia is Finished: The Unstoppable Descent into Social Catastrophe and Strategic Irrelevance," a recent article in the Atlantic Monthly, examines the rule of lawlessness that is the result of a failure of leadership. This is a topic of some interest to me since The International Center for Psychosocial Trauma at the University of Missouri-Columbia has done some leadership training in former communist countries, with law enforcement officers in Russia and students in both Bulgaria and Bosnia.

The center started out working only with trauma. We added leadership training when the center's director, Arshad Husain, a child psychiatrist from the University of Missouri-Columbia Medical School, was asked to develop a program for the American University in Bulgaria. Since then we have been running an ongoing program on leadership with a group of 40 students from Bosnia. Although these are small-scale training programs, they raise some serious questions in my mind about the condition of leadership in former communist countries.

\*Why does leadership style need to change in former communist nations?

First, former communists I've met talk a lot, but they don't seem to know how to make a plan of action. When I first began visiting Bosnia in 1995 to help run workshops, I was dismayed by the ability of the leaders to talk at length about a problem and never end up with any point-at-able action that could be taken to solve the problem. It was almost as if talking about the problem had been the solution. I pointed this out on several occasions by asking, "What are you specifically going to do? That is, I don't see any plan of action." All I got in answer were blank looks as if my question itself was meaningless.

Second, they can no longer control their citizens' access to information. Under the old system, which was basically a dictatorship, the control of information was important. Part of this caution related to the protective stance the government took during the Cold War to prevent its citizens from getting information that would confuse them about the condition of their economy from the rest of the world.

There are now many sources of information available, and to have complete control they would have to keep their nations free of all modern technical advances such as cell phones, copy machines, the Internet and, perhaps most important, CNN and MTV. Despite government control, people now find ways to build satellite dishes and tune into CNN. An enlightened public can't be led in the old style.

\* How do you introduce new leadership concepts when all of the old models have been dictatorial?

Leadership under communism had a set of beliefs that was doomed from the start but that allowed officials to stay in power long after the futility of their beliefs had become evident. It was delusional of them to believe we can have a modern society devoid of social rank and ownership of personal property. Their theory was that competition created duplication and was therefore wasteful. Once entrenched, the leadership would not admit to making any wrong decisions, and they made many of them. To admit to errors would be to lose status, and loss of status could mean off to the salt mines.

Execution, Siberia or hospitalization for mental illness were common means to deal with opposition beliefs. These methods effectively killed off all new ideas and innovation. Outside influences are now forcing changes and corrections, but leaders still in the old mold are not able to respond intelligently.

At first, I struggled with students in Bulgaria over their definition of leadership. They defined it as they had seen it in action under communism: Leaders make decisions, and followers carry them out. Variation and innovation are dangerous to the system. We were pleased when after our initial training they developed the following two-part definition: "A. Leadership is the ability to influence, motivate, organize and coordinate groups of people in order to achieve specific goals. B. Leadership is the ability to interact and to collaborate with the people and to direct them in reaching commonly sought goals in an efficient and effective way." This idea of encouraging input from all group members appealed to their own need to contribute to creative solutions to problems.

When my students from American University in Bulgaria took a group of future leaders from Kosovo to train, they ran into the same problem. Kosovars saw leadership as a one-way decision-making process. If they made you the leader, you were to make all major decisions with a minimum of input from the led.

\*How do you train a new generation of leaders who don't take corruption for granted?

Young people we have trained in these countries are concerned about corruption. Massive greed on the part of leaders is expected. Bringing riches to family members is standard, and the necessity of a criminal element running a shadow government to make the system work is assumed. The young people we have worked with recognize the damage that corruption does to the entire nation. Because it so often starts at the top and exists at all levels, they feel helpless to stop it, but they recognize the damage it does to the overall quality of life in their countries.

As a result, part of the problem will be to get honest potential leaders to go back to their original countries once they have been trained in the U.S. style of democratic leadership. Many will prefer to work for multinational companies, and others who study in the United States will prefer to stay here.

There is pressure from a number of levels for countries to control their internal corruption: The World Bank and the European Union are putting pressure on the Balkans to establish market economies that are free from bribes and graft.

Despite these difficulties, U.S. leadership concepts will have a big influence on the directions these new leaders take. Part of our problem will be exposing more young people in former communist nations to democratic ideas and the market economy.