Many distinctions are often made between rural and urban areas. The Alabama Commerce Commission Report in 2000 stated “clearly, there are two Alabamas, one urban and the other rural.” While there are many differences, both Alabamas require effective leadership to be successful and thrive in these challenging times. Some Timely Thoughts for Rural Leaders will encourage the development of this leadership.

The Economic and Community Development Institute (ECDI), a partnership of Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) and Auburn University, publishes “Action” once each quarter. ECDI’s vision is to become the state’s preeminent change agent for positive economic and community development policy and practice. ECDI attempts to serve Alabama communities, especially small- and medium-sized rural and economically distressed areas, and to maintain effective connections and communication among the many diverse economic development actors in Alabama. “Action” is one of the methods we use to accomplish these goals.

Some Timely Thoughts for Rural Leaders is the focus of this summer 2010 issue of ECDI in Action. Dennis Evans, rural leadership specialist with ECDI, is the coordinator for this segment of the newsletter.

The next issue of “Action,” fall 2010, will highlight the Alabama Communities of Excellence program. For more information on these topics or suggestions for additional topics, contact the editor at (334) 844-3517, fax (334) 844-4709, or e-mail chesnjt@auburn.edu.

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Editor
Tourism and Extension Relations Specialist, ECDI

What Makes Good People and Good Leaders Last

There are those among us who say that the times will only get worse, but, even if they do, I prefer to take a positive view. I believe in the old saying, “Bad times don’t last, but good people do.” And, in Alabama, we have some good people, generally speaking, and some good leaders too. Believe me, we’re going to overcome obstacles, including this recession. Trust me. Times continue to be hard and it would be easy to get discouraged, to lose confidence and quit. But good people and, for that matter, good leaders last because they have in effect a moral compass that guides them in the right direction. They have a basic set of principles by which they live. They have standards and try very hard to maintain them. Good leaders are simply good people who have built upon that moral compass within them and embody traits or characteristics that make for good leadership.

Researchers James Kouzes and Barry Posner asked respondents in six continents to name seven positive characteristics of admired leaders (Source: The Leadership Challenge, 2002). The seven traits of admired leaders identified, in descending order, were that a good leader is honest, forward looking, competent, inspiring, intelligent, fair minded, and broad minded. These key characteristics of a good leader, relate back to the aforementioned moral compass or basic principles one has such as integrity, loyalty, and respect for others. Intrinsic values are translated into behaviors and they are congruent in a good person or a good leader.

Hard times more than easy times call on us to stand firm with our basic principles and to sharpen our leadership skills also. I conclude the old saying is right and that good people (and good leaders) will last, not just in bad times, but always.

(Continued on page 2)
Followership Makes for Better Leadership

Leadership and followership go together; after all, you can’t have leaders without followers. Much attention is given to how you become a leader or become a better leader and how you get people to follow you. Of course, many factors contribute to making a person a leader, but one attribute I think is often overlooked is the experience of being a follower. Followership, I think, makes for better leadership, pure and simple. Let me explain.

We are all followers, even the leaders among us, though, we are not typically both leader and follower at the same time. In one arena, we may be the leader and, in another, we may be the follower. But I believe that the experience of being a follower, even in its simplest form, helps one be a better leader.

The simplest example of followership most people can associate with is being a follower of a religious faith. Many people in Alabama are Christians and routinely refer to themselves as followers of Christ. Non-Christians are followers of their faiths too. The point is that for most of us this followership is a basis of everyday life, including leadership. Being a follower of whatever faith undergirds everything else if you are a true believer.

There are, of course, other examples of followership. Almost a religion in this state, college football has many followers, especially at Auburn and Alabama. And if you are not a football fan, most people in Alabama are followers of either the Republican or Democratic party. And there are many other examples where you are a follower.

Being a follower has power and majesty even unto itself, but beyond that, the very act and role of being a follower is a training ground for becoming a leader. One doesn’t become a church leader without the experience beforehand of being a follower in the church. One doesn’t become a college quarterback or the coach without having followed the game for a long time. One doesn’t become head of a political party in the state without having been a long time follower of the party. So definitely, followership is the entry route to leadership in most instances.

Sometimes leaders will arise without the normal process of their having been followers in a particular arena. A retired general might be named a college president or CEO of a major corporation. A political independent might be elected as governor of a state. However, in these unusual circumstances, the leader was no doubt a follower somewhere else, even if not in that particular sphere. And that experience is an attribute.

Being a follower provides a person with a natural grounding and also helps build them up for leadership in that area or some other area. Being a follower can provide a basic humility and commitment to service for others. Followership can and does make for better leadership. Ideally, followership with other attributes can make you a servant leader, one who more fully understands and nurtures your followers.

In conclusion, we are reminded that followership and leadership are very much related and that they are, in effect, two sides of the same coin. And followership, especially if it is good, only makes for a more solid foundation for effective leadership and service to others.

The Mentor

It’s a popular word today, though I frankly don’t ever remember hearing the term “mentor” when I was growing up. But I knew what a mentor was even if I didn’t have a word for the role. Other than my own key family leaders, the various outside mentors in my life have made a big difference in what I have made of myself. And no doubt you can recall at least one special mentor — that is, a wise and trusted counselor, teacher or influential sponsor or supporter — who helped you significantly along the way. You might be able to name several mentors in your life. Mentors are special people indeed for what they do.

The first person I can recall who was a real mentor to me was Mrs. Fern Calvert, a member of my church when I was growing up. She was the educated wife of the bank president and a homemaker, who, besides her church work, kept an expansive yard with lots of flowers and shrubs. She needed help in the yard. I was her yard boy and she paid me, of course. But she was a wonderful mentor too. She was a great encourager for one relatively disadvantaged kid from a family with 13 children. I will never forget Mrs. Calvert for her mentorship during those formative years. And I’ll never forget her 1955 white Thunderbird (actually her husband’s) that I got to ride in.

I had a couple of wonderful teachers in high school who were mentors. But, perhaps most interestingly, the principal, Mr. J.D. Rogers, was a special mentor to me. The school was small, 183 students in all 12 grades. Mr. Rogers liked me because my family had a dairy, and he did too on the side, so we shared that bond. My junior and senior years, I worked an hour or so a day in the principal’s office and even got to direct a fire drill once. When Mr. Rogers died some years later, I was, of course, at his funeral.

I don’t recall any key mentors in undergraduate school, but, in graduate school, there were two professors who had a profound influence on me. Dr. Vernon Parenton was totally blind (from a WWII injury in the Pacific) and I had the privilege of being his graduate assistant. He taught me much about quiet strength, courage and
tenacity. The other professor, Dr. Alvin Bertrand, was an endowed professor with lots of on-the-ground contacts. He taught me about the power of networking and of thinking big.

As a professional, things have largely changed, and I have found myself being the mentor lots of times and not the mentee anymore. But that is as it should be, isn’t it? As the mentor, it is you who is the trusted counselor. It is a heavy responsibility when you think about it. But being a mentor has its own wonderful rewards. As an example, one of my mentees, who was a participant 10 years ago in a leadership program I ran for many years, continues to call me for advice and counsel. We talk all the time. One day recently he called to tell me he had accepted an important job in International Programs and went on to credit me for helping him in a major way get him to where he is at. You may have your own story about having a mentor, of being a mentee and of coming full circle and becoming a mentor yourself. Mentorship in its several forms is a wonderful thing. And it is a critical ingredient in encouraging more and better leadership. Hoorah for the mentor.

Four Ingredients of a Democratic Leader

The author Warren Bennis says there are but four key ingredients of the successful democratic leader. Here are those four ingredients with my comments about leaders in our time whom embodied the respective elements:

Vision

The true leader has a clear vision of where he or she wants to go, has a plan to get there and has the strength to persist in the face of setbacks and failures. I can’t think of better leaders with vision than Mahatma Ghandi of India and Martin Luther King. Mr. Gandi had a vision that India would become independent from the British Commonwealth, and he knew how the goal could be accomplished. Dr. King had his dream of social justice for African-Americans and effectively used nonviolent civil disobedience methods to change American society and laws for the better.

Passion

The real leader has a strong commitment to what he or she is doing and communicates that passion to create wide support. I can’t think of better leaders with passion than Mother Teresa and Princess Diana. Mother Teresa, of course, worked tirelessly through her Sisters of Charity organization to help the poor of India and other countries. Lady Di, called the “People’s Princess,” worked passionately to stop the use of land mines and also worked in other causes. Both women were certainly leaders with passion.

Integrity

The successful leader has an overall state of wholeness and of being undivided. They know themselves and they are in every sense whole. It comes through in everything they do. Pope John Paul II to me embodied perhaps more than any other leader of our time the concept of integrity. He clearly was among the most influential leaders of the 20th century and enjoyed admiration of people of all faiths. It was because of his integrity as a leader.

Curiosity and Daring

The true leader is willing to try to go where nobody has gone before and has the courage to do so. In this age of the information revolution, I can’t think of better examples of curiosity and daring than the leaders of Microsoft and Google. Bill Gates is the best known entrepreneur relating to the personal computer. Moving on beyond Microsoft, Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, are now boldly leading their foundation with projects around the globe. Perhaps not so well known by name, Larry Page and Sergey Brin of Google saw the need for an effective search engine to guide the computer user to websites. Starting in a friend’s garage, they named the company as a play on the math term “googol” represented by the numeral 1 followed by 100 zeros to symbolize the company goal of organizing a seemingly infinite amount of information.

Clearly, the ingredients of vision, passion, integrity, and curiosity and daring are key elements of successful leadership. We should all work on each of these elements and also model our behavior to successful leaders we know and respect, whether in the public arena or right around us, so we can be a better leader.

Dennis Evans
Rural Leadership Specialist
ECDI
Important upcoming events:

Alabama Community Leadership Network Conference,
October 6–7, Montgomery, Al.

Mississippi-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference,
October 25–27, Oxford, Miss.

Alabama Prosperity Forum Course
How to Win Projects,
December 9–10, Auburn, Al.