



## Great Leaders Champion Social Change

By Dr. Lorne Foster

It is said that in one of many turbulent events during the revolution of 1848 in France, Alphonse de Lamartine, the famous poet and statesman, was seen by one of his friends hastily leaving the Chamber of Deputies in pursuit of a noisy crowd of Paris citizens bent on proclaiming still another revolutionary government from the balcony of Hotel de Ville. When asked why he was leaving, Lamartine replied: “Je suis leur chef. Il faut que je les suive!” (“I am their leader. I must therefore follow them!”)

The legend of Lamartine has led to many investigative questions for the sociology of leadership development and social change.

For instance, do great cultural leaders define the spirit of their times, or are they limited by the spirit of their times? Do their ideas and policies precipitate the events of history, or must their ideas and policies coincide with the flow of historical events? Can a crisis or important event cause someone to rise to the occasion, and bring out extraordinary leadership qualities in ordinary people? Or can personality traits lead people naturally, or even reluctantly, into leadership roles?

After long and considered examination, many sociologists have come to the conclusion there may be as many variants for leadership development as there have been great cultural leaders. They have come in every colour and description. In different times and circumstances, great leaders have evolved in many different ways, and exercised influence in various forms. But, great leaders from all cultures have one thing in common. They are always champions of social change.

Great leaders influence others to accomplish a mission, task, or objective in a way that informs and directs their cultural group and makes it more cohesive and coherent. They are not only oriented toward the art of the possible, they are oriented toward the art of possibilities. They not only operate in the here-and-now, they are representatives of a strong vision-of-the-future. In this respect, the greatest leaders are the followers of their own followers in the sense that they always champion the cultural vision that gives purpose, meaning and significance to people's lives.

The good news for people of colour and other negatively privileged groups is that great leadership can not be made into the preserve of the appointed nor the anointed – it cannot be a consignment of a privileged race or a power elite. Indeed, the road to great leadership for people of colour in this society is the same road traveled by all throughout human history – by the likes of the intrepid poet Alphonse de Lamartine – who learned how to follow and take the lead in a shared vision of a better world for their people.

Today, sociologists equate the concept of vision to an “internal compass,” and recurrently acknowledge that it is the make-or-break-task of the leader. That is, the greatest leaders are those who learn to “manage the community dream.” Accordingly, they are transformational in their

thinking in the sense that their ultimate goal and function in and for their cultural group (to borrow the heroic terms of Joseph Campbell) is “to transport the mind in experience past the guardians – fear and desire – of the paradisaal gate to the tree within of illuminated life.”

In a more mundane terms, this means that the greatest leaders are made not born – even if they are born to lead. For in order to inspire people into higher levels of being or consciousness there are certain things that one must be, know, and, do. These do not come naturally, but are acquired through continual work and study. Hence, the truly accomplished cultural leaders are continually working to improve their leadership skills through a never-ending process of self-study, education, training, and experience.

To put it another way, great leadership makes people want to achieve high goals and objectives. And a person carries out this process by learning and applying their leadership attributes at a structural, human resource, political, and a symbolic level.

(1) At the structural level, the great leader is a social architect whose leadership style is analysis and design in terms of organizational strategy, environment, implementation, experimentation, and adaptation. (2) At the human resource level, the leader is a catalyst and servant whose leadership style is to support and empower through increasing participation, sharing information, and moving decision making down into the organization. (3) At the political level the leader is an advocate, whose leadership style is coalition building and strategic alliances. Leaders clarify what they want and what they can get; they assess the distribution of power and interests; they build linkages to other stakeholders; use persuasion first, then use negotiation and coercion (only) if necessary. (4) And, finally, at the symbolic level, the leader is a prophet, whose leadership style is inspiration. Symbolic leadership views organization as a stage or theater to play certain roles and give impressions; these leaders use symbols to capture attention; they try to frame experience by providing plausible interpretations of experiences; they discover and communicate a picture of the future that propels people’s lives forward.

In today’s world, it is important for people of colour to be aware that we can now do by design what others who battled for social change in the past could only intuit. We have the sociology to create visionary leadership by design – where willpower meets preparation for the empowerment of community.