

# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP *with* Fusi Akinkugbe

## Wanted! Leaders who can deal with opposition and criticism

**T**his title is something I believe should be added to every leader's job description. Leaders must be able to deal with criticism and opposition. Since they are expected to lead people with diverse opinions and backgrounds, often in difficult circumstances, they cannot expect everyone to always go along with them. All leaders will face opposition at some point. It comes with the territory. Everyone cannot always agree with you or be happy with what you are doing even if you think what you are doing is good or is in the interest of others. Here are four things to help us better handle opposition and criticism:

First, you require inner strength and conviction about your purpose and goals, because opposition can destabilise you. Sometimes opposition can be relentless and even abusive. A leader with inner strength and conviction about his or her purpose will not easily be distracted from it. Baroness Margaret Thatcher during her political career faced opposition. As Britain's Education Secretary, she was labelled by a newspaper as the most unpopular woman in Britain. But she did not let it deter her, rather she continued working to gain people's respect. She was eventually elected the first British female prime minister, and as Prime Minister she continued to face criticism for her policies and decisions but remained secure in her convictions. She was elected to three consecutive terms as

prime minister and was the longest serving in the 20th Century. Leadership in the face of opposition is for those who are strong.

Secondly, you must be able to take criticism in perspective. Sir Alex Ferguson, former manager of Manchester United Football Club said: *"I have always found it helpful to put criticism in perspective"*. People who take every form of criticism or opposition personally will find themselves easily distracted from their purpose. As a leader – especially one in the public eye you must have a thick skin. Opposition and criticism must not deter you from your goals, though admittedly there are times when criticism is hurtful or demoralising. However, when criticism and allegations are unfounded and untrue, they must be robustly rebutted and one's integrity properly defended.

Thirdly, as much as possible convert your critics and opposers into allies. This increases the possibility of achieving our goals as leaders, and it increases our leadership influence as we win over those who opposed us. In 2002 at the age of 37, Hiroshi Nakada was elected Mayor of Yokohama, Japan. Upon assuming office, one of the most urgent problems he saw that the city faced was reducing the amount of its garbage. So, he decided to solve this problem.

Seeking to solve a problem and achieve results means we must be ready to face opposition. The opposition he and his team faced was from some of the city's residents who complained about being put through the bother of new garbage

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sorting requirements. There was also opposition from city government officials who would work with him, who said a reduction in garbage would be impossible. It was an exceptionally uphill task for the young Mayor. Instead of this dampening his resolve, he and his team worked to overcome the opposition by making efforts to change the views of the citizens and city officials and communicating the benefits of the change.

The programme was eventually a success, and the target for garbage reduction was exceeded. People may resist what you are trying to do, but as you persist, remain focused

and communicate the benefits, you will eventually win them over.

The fourth thing is humility in listening to feedback from others. As we climb up the organisational ladder, somehow those who can speak to us truthfully begin to dwindle. Listening to and accepting honest feedback no matter how unpleasant from colleagues and even subordinates, has a humbling effect on you as a leader. *It takes great humility for a leader to accept unpleasant truths, especially when they come from down the ladder.* It reminds you of your limitations, that you don't have all the answers and you need the support and help of others. It also helps the organisation, since good ideas and positive contributions can come from anywhere internally.

When you accept that the purpose for which you have become a leader is bigger than you or your ego, you are more likely to accept truth that advances it. Every critic is not necessarily an enemy: criticism may be due to the fear of change or even ignorance, and criticism may not always be from a negative standpoint – it may be constructive. But if the leader lacks humility, or the environment is one in which truth cannot be heard, then any benefits of constructive criticism will be lost.

Unfortunately, we see many wrong examples of leadership, with leaders who cannot handle the truth, and are told what they want to hear. In such environments there is no place for constructive criticism, objective dissenters are enemies and sycophants prosper.

This destroys the genuine interests of the group.

It takes courage to speak truth to power, and an organisation's culture plays a significant role in making it possible for people to speak up when the need arises. Leaders have the responsibility to ensure that they humble themselves to hear the truth, and that within the organisation there are no impediments that make it difficult or impossible for truth to be spoken.

Let me end with this: *"To do justice to a great man, discriminating criticism is necessary."* Winston Churchill.

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to begin to lead from where you are.



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