

Naidoo explores the psychology of leaders and their followers

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I started out being very interested from a very young age in biology. I loved animals, birds and wildlife, and spent much of my time running around the woods in Canada identifying different species and such,” says Loren Naidoo. Yet this native of Montreal decided to make a career in psychology.

“In high school I had a close friend who was somebody everyone liked and looked up to and wanted as a friend. At a certain point, he attempted suicide and that really floored me and really made me wonder how is it that this person that everyone really looks up to and thinks is wonderful could feel this way about himself.”

Hence his interest in psychology was born.

He went on to obtain a bachelor’s degree in psychology, a master’s at McGill University in Montreal, and another master’s and a doctorate at the University of Akron in Ohio. Today he is an associate professor of psychology in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY.

“I got involved in research at McGill, and there was something really thrilling to me about designing a study. There’s nothing quite as exciting as conducting a study and collecting your data and then being able to look at the data and seeing, wow, what people do really makes an impact on behavior, and seeing that and having it tangible is really exciting to me,” says Naidoo.

That’s where his interest in psychology started, and he became interested in industrial organizational psychology in particular. “Some of the most influential figures in my life were the coaches I had as leaders of our team,” he says. I was really focused on showing how good I was at a young age, and that’s really a maladaptive mindset when it comes to a lot of contexts, particularly sports as well as academics, this focus on showing how good you are.”

Naidoo believes that there may be circumstances in which you can have a group without a formal leader. “I think that even where you don’t have formal leadership, you typically have informal



Dr. Naidoo at his office.

leaders who emerge spontaneously. That may not be what people think of when they think of leadership. They may think of this sort of positional leadership, but I think you always have leadership in one form or another.”

When it comes to the question of whether good leaders are born or made, he has a clear vision of the issue. “I think you can become a good leader. It really depends on what you mean by a good leader. It depends on what outcomes we want to attribute to leadership or what we’re focusing on. I think it’s possible to be a good leader without being particularly charismatic,” he says.

Naidoo believes that charisma is not everything. “Unfortunately, there are some downsides to being charismatic. There is in fact research on what’s called the dark side of charisma, where you have a

very influential leader who is motivated by a sort of personalized power motive rather than a socialized power motive. They’re really sort of interested in self-aggrandizing and pursuing their own sort of narcissistic goals, and some of this might sound somewhat familiar at this point.”

When asked if some of our evaluation of leaders is unconscious, he is affirmative. “We tend to process a lot of information in a subconscious way. Non-verbal behavior, body language, facial expressions, gestures—a lot of this info is processed without our necessarily being aware of it, and I think this is what underlies some experiences we may have where we meet somebody and we hear them speak and we agree with what they’re saying, and yet somehow we have a negative impression.”

But can anybody be a leader? “It doesn’t come

naturally to everyone, but some simple things that leaders can do to improve would be develop a vision if you don’t have one—Where do you want to go?—rather than focusing on day-to-day kind of operational types of issues,” explains Naidoo.

He urges us not to confuse civilian leadership with military leadership. “The military tends to have more rigid hierarchies. The stakes are much higher.”

In this time and age, one wonders whether you can display leadership through social media. “I’m not active on Facebook, I’ve never tried Twitter, and I think that’s a sort of silly position for me to take in a lot of ways because these things are not going anywhere, and I think it’s very clear if we look at the recent election here that social media is playing a role and that it’s important to try to understand what that role is.”

A question that is always lurking when it comes to projecting a leadership image is your physical presence. “People use information about somebody’s appearance to form impressions of people, and that becomes less important, I think, the more you develop relationships with people and image becomes a secondary or tertiary issue. Initially, I think it’s probably reasonable to acknowledge that physical appearance is having an impact on people’s impressions of you, and so depending on what impression you want to form, appearance or image is part of that,” he explains.

He acknowledges that context is also important. “We see that, for example, in the tech industry, unconventional attire is more the norm to show that you’re ‘exciting, new,’ that you’re not sort of constrained by these traditional issues, and that’s a way of attracting talent who share those values, whereas you might have quite a different emphasis if you’re in the financial services industry, for example.”

Thus, image is not always everything.

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