

This column is based on Dr. McTeer's remarks to the participants in the [Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership program](#) on July 13. It is reprinted from the July/August 2006 issue of "Systemwide" a publication of The Texas A&M University System. For his more serious thoughts on leadership, see "[Switches and Dials.](#)"



Zinedine Zidane

Leadership and the head butt felt around the world

I started worrying about what I was going to say last Sunday. I was on vacation with grandkiddos at Lakeway outside Austin. I picked up the newspaper and turned to the Sports page, which I rarely do, to learn something about the World Cup finals that afternoon.

I don't even know the rules of soccer, but both my grandkids play, so I felt some obligation. The article was on this guy named Zinedine Zidane, captain and star of the French team. Someone was quoted as saying "It's amazing that someone 34 is still able to do such amazing things on the pitch." (Imagine that, at 34 years old.)

French defender Willy Sagnol said of Zidane, "He is a natural leader. It is a pleasure to follow in his footsteps." The writer described Zidane as ". . . a modest man who summons an elegant flamboyance on the field."

My attention went to the "natural leader" description, apparently because he was right good at kicking a football—a round football. I thought of Andre Agassi, who had played his last professional singles tennis match a couple of days earlier at Wimbledon. He was also a natural leader—because he could hit a tennis ball really well. And he had a natural flamboyance—from shoulder-length hair to a shaved head. From Brooke Shields to Steffi Graf.

Then I thought back to Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, and so on. Obviously, being a natural leader has something to do with skill with a ball of some sort.

Well, that afternoon I actually made the big sacrifice and watched the World Cup final between France and Italy. I wanted to see this natural leader, Zidane, in action. And I saw him deliver the mother of all head butts—the head butt felt around the world.

This natural leader, captain of the French team, with the whole world watching, playing in the final match of his career, traded his life as he knew it for the satisfaction of one great head butt. And it was a great head butt. It lifted the Italian off his feet and landed him on his back.

So much for natural leaders. Leadership, it appears, is a fragile thing. What do I know about leadership? Not much. I know it helps if you are good with a ball of some sort. My favorite quote on leadership in a business or corporate context is that leadership is the art of not letting your panic show.

Leaders must be self-confident, or at least fake it well. “Fake it ‘till you make it.” I was once being interviewed for the job of dean of a business school—as a favor for a headhunter friend of mine; I wouldn’t have taken the job if they’d offered it to me—anyway, one of the faculty members on the search committee had been nosing around my website.

He’d found a quote in one of my speeches where I’d said the most important characteristic is sincerity, and, if you can fake that, you have it made. He read it aloud to the assembled group and then asked me if it was a joke. I told him it was a joke, but that I had delivered it much better than he did.

If my experience is typical, a lot of time in leadership development programs is wasted discussing the difference or distinction between being a good manager and a good leader. That’s worth some time, but not as much as it usually gets. They are different, but both are important.

Casey Stengel had my favorite quote on managing. He said “the secret to managing is to keep the guys who hate your guts away from those who are still undecided.”



Winston Churchill

I think being a good manager is a good first step to being a good leader. It isn’t necessary, but it helps. Winston Churchill—the quintessential leader—was probably a decent manager as well. My main evidence for that is one line in his six-volume *History of the*

Second World War, which I read in its entirety in graduate school when I was supposed to be writing my dissertation. That line was something like: “Please give me, on one page, the present deployment of our tanks.”

That’s not an exact quote, but it’s close enough. What I liked about it, of course, was the one page part. Ever since then, I’ve tried to get one-page memos, with very little success.

It is clear that “leader” is higher in the pecking order than “manager.” Nobody ever heard of a “world manager.” It’s “world leader.”

I don’t know much about what it takes to be a good leader, but I do know some things. I strongly suspect some other things, and I have a hunch about others. So, if you won’t ask me to prove any of it, I’ll share some of my wisdom:

First off, leaders aren’t all cut from the same cloth. They come in all sizes, shapes, colors and genders. Some look like Arnold Schwarzenegger and some look like Danny DeVito.

But let’s not kid ourselves: Arnold does have an advantage in that comparison, so Danny would have to work harder at it. Sort of like what Ginger Rogers said about dancing with Fred Astaire: She had to do everything he did, except backwards and in high heels.

Going back to the natural leader Zidane, I do think a little elegant flamboyance helps. For example, I think Patton was well served by his pearl-handled pistols. Churchill by his cigar. But there’s not much of a message there. There’s a logic trap. Rich men used to smoke big cigars, but smoking big cigars didn’t make them rich. The question is whether to be a good leader you should copy a good leader you know, or just be yourself.

My answer to that is, “You have no choice but to be yourself. Who else are you going to be?” If you make your big splash or get that big job by copying someone else, you’re stuck with that role for the rest of your life. You’ve got to be yourself. It’s the only way you can keep your story straight. But don’t be “just yourself.” Knock out the “just.” The goal is to be a better version of yourself. To be the best “you” that you can be. To be better and better every day, in every way, as they say.

You can’t effectively copy role models, but you can learn from them. What do they do? How do they behave that makes you think of them as a leader? You know that, of course. But you may not have thought much about using negative role models as examples of what not to do.

Early in the ‘70s I had the misfortune of being in a carpool with my boss. (That’s to be avoided at all costs.) But the good side of it for me was that we had a third member in that car pool who worked for the same boss and who outranked me. (Because he was older, of course.)

I lucked out because this third member was prone to road rage. He was always cussing and fussing about something while he drove. That was my opportunity to show the boss

how different I was. I became a paragon of patience, at least when the boss was in the car.



Alan Greenspan

I guess the oddest, least likely, leader I've known is Alan Greenspan. I met with him on the FOMC every six weeks on average for 14 years before I came to the A&M System. Plus other occasions. He broke all the rules. He was not only NOT a good manager, he didn't try to be a manager at all. He relied on others for that. He delegated management. Neither was he an effervescent live wire.

He was painfully shy when not in the limelight. If he came to speak to your group, he'd manage to arrive just in time to avoid the need for small talk beforehand. He did large talk; not small talk. You could ask him how the world works, and he would tell you. Convincingly, and in great detail.

He was awkward in social situations—normally the kiss of death for a wannabe leader. Yet the ladies loved him. It was a Kissinger-like power thing, I suppose. So, he had everything going against him as a potential leader.

However, in congressional testimony and in FOMC meetings, he was the smartest guy in the room. He never had to pull rank to get agreement. He simply convinced you he was right. And he usually was.

I got something of a reputation as a maverick by voting against him three times. That never affected our relationship at all. Our relationship was that he didn't understand what made me tick. He thought I was an odd duck. But he learned that my oddness never put his beloved institution in jeopardy, so it was okay with him.

And I think he knew, without our ever talking about it, that I would have taken a bullet for him if necessary—in the leg. So, why was I happy to have Alan Greenspan as my leader? The short answer is: He made me proud.

When financial commentators referred to “Greenspan and Company,” I smiled because I was part of that “Company.” When he testified before Congress, he had no equal.

Republicans and Democrats competed to try to get him to agree with their position on anything and everything.

In the first few of his 18 years as chairman, they treated him pretty rough. But he just rolled with the punches and resisted the strong temptation to get up and deliver a well-deserved head butt.

Was he dull? Yes. Did he use arcane language? Yes. But somehow he turned his dull act into rock stardom. He is proof that there is more than one way to be a leader.

There may be some “natural leaders” but there are also some things that we unnatural leaders can learn to make us more effective.

Here are some of my candidates:

- Optimism trumps pessimism. Have you ever seen a statue of a pessimist?
- Go to the scene of any crisis. You might be more effective manning the phones back at headquarters, but the folks want to see you walking in the rubble.
- If you are the mayor on vacation in the tropics, and a snow storm hits your city, take the first plane back.
- Don't expect people to do what you say and not what you do.
- Walking your talk is more important than talking your walk.
- Be action oriented.
- Show some courage if needed. To do that you need some liquid savings to think of as your go-to-hell money. Or have a farm in Australia. As in, “Well, there's always the farm in Australia . . .”

Remember that, to be a leader, you must have followers. A good cowboy looks back occasionally to see if the herd is still there. Even if the herd is still there, watch out for those head butts.

[Visit Dr. McTeer's website](#)

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob McTeer". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.