

EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP: FROM DE GAULLE TO MERKEL

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There is a photograph of president Charles de Gaulle by Bernard Paille taken from a high vantage point in which the French leader is standing in the middle of dozens of officials who surround him in an impeccable concentric formation. Regardless of whether the photo was set up – which is doubtful – it is a depiction of what old-style leadership is all about. The leader at the core, commanding the absolute and orderly attention of his officials.

During a recent debate at the European Parliament Office in Nicosia on the Eurozone crisis and on how detached European leaders appear to be from public opinion, there was a widespread resigned admission that there are no real European leaders anymore.

To the above assumption the participating Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus Mr Kasoulides responded that gone are the times when leaders could command adulation and enjoy unique leadership status. He remarked that today's leaders suffer in the eyes of the public because of their unprecedented exposure to the media. An exposure, he maintained, that humanizes them to a degree that the public cannot construct or perceive them as leaders. Certainly not to the degree enjoyed by legendary figures such as de Gaulle whose faults and frailties in the absence of prying media were rarely exposed.

It is clear that today's fast and in-your-face media context has changed the parameters both of the substance of leadership and certainly of the image of leadership.

A quick tour around the 27, now 28, European Council table does not easily reveal any candidates likely to take charge and sort matters out in Europe. Some would argue that German Chancellor Angela Merkel is the exception though few would argue that she is actually doing enough to live up to that perception.

Compare the carefully constructed and rehearsed speeches by British prime minister Winston Churchill to, let us say, the casual tweeting of another member of that European table tour: David Cameron. Clearly the current prime minister does not enjoy heavyweight leadership status. Is it because we know so much about him? Is it because we have seen and heard him repeatedly, tediously, that there is no mystery about him, that he is, "one of us"?

Watching footage of the seemingly impromptu, yet carefully-staged, Cameron visits to British troops in Afghanistan one could argue that they are no different to the not so staged Churchill visits to the frontline during World War II. The chubby, cigar-smoking oddity among the frail combatants was as odd a presence as the baby-faced Cameron touring the desert battlefield last month.

Why then is Churchill's set up a more convincing leadership show? Churchill had planned and fought in battles, albeit in some quite miserably as in the Norway debacle, but most with great success. He, like de Gaulle, had the one ingredient that supersedes all else in making them suitable for leadership. Charisma, charm and astuteness aside, he and De Gaulle had actually "been there". They had the experience that gave them the authority and the credibility that in itself has the capacity to mitigate any other potential weaknesses.

Whether running a business, managing a newsroom or heading a government agency, the single element that establishes the foundations upon which the substance of leadership is based, is that both you and your employees know full well where you stand and what you are talking about. That in fact you've been there, done it and above all done it well.

That every soldier in the trenches knew that Churchill was aware of precisely what they did and felt was key in their devotion to him and the cause at hand.

Steve Jobs became a leadership model in part because he had been the guy in the garage actually designing the first apple computer. Vision was not enough. He knew the ins and outs of every product. New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani became a leadership model because he had been the state prosecutor who took on the New York criminal world to court. He knew which streets had problems and who was causing them. That is how he managed to reduce New York crime to unprecedented levels.

Of course 21st century entrepreneurial context does not necessarily require Churchillian traits. Certainly knowing your industry, your employees and constituency, and what they need and want, are meaningful ingredients that help shape those decisions that make or break leaders.

The problem with Europe today is not only that we have not yet transitioned well into the collective leadership that is necessary to make the project work but that fewer and fewer of the 28 leaders believe in Europe enough to want to want to make it work. It is near impossible for the 28 to found common ground that would permit them to make gains from collective leadership that would satisfy their individual constituencies.

In the absence of Churchills and de Gaulles and the frailties of the Camerons and the Hollandes it falls to the reluctant and procrastinating Chancellor Angela Merkel to take charge of this seemingly leaderless Europe and turn its economy around. If Merkel secures a third term in office in September she will become the longest serving European leader. Presiding over her own robust and disciplined economy she certainly has the authority to drive Europe into growth.

Like de Gaulle, her faults and weaknesses have rarely been exposed. There is still a certain mystery about her that the media continue to struggle with. What better advantage to exploit in her quest to take on a strong European role and to salvage a mediocre and confused European Council. To succeed she will, however, need to think in European and not only in German terms.