As we watch the unraveling of systems and structures around the world, we hunger for leadership worthy of trust. The times demand pervasive leadership to which all of us contribute our share. So how can we develop trustworthy leadership? Although we should not delude ourselves that this is an easy task, I believe that, as a beginning, we can try to live at least the following five commitments in our various leadership roles.

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Question Ourselves

First and foremost, we can question ourselves. Effective leadership comes from an inner core of integrity and yet is not fixed, stubborn, or implacable. Leaders we trust are open to our thoughtful influence. They are aware that they cannot possess all the answers because they can have only one perspective. They are eager to hear responsible critique, and the viewpoints of others.
When leaders inspire us, we experience them as consistently themselves—yes—we sense in them a solid self-confidence, but not one that walls others out. Clear about who they are, they can open themselves to others. They stay attuned to their inner truth through disciplines that keep them honest, knowing, as the ancients did, that the first and most demanding obligation of a leader is the Socratic injunction to “know thyself.” Yeats wrote that “we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.” Trustworthy leaders are poets; they quarrel with themselves.

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**Establish Partnerships**

Second, since even if we know ourselves, we can’t know all we need to know from our own limited perspective, we need to establish partnerships as the basic units for accomplishing work. And they have to be reliable partnerships, which means investing time and energy in preserving their integrity. Reliable partnerships help prevent the distortions of information that often result from perceived or real imbalances of power—distortions produced by projections on to the leader and/or the tendency to shield her from bad news. Trustworthy leaders choose their partners wisely, for a range of perspectives and for a sense of shared core values. They negotiate the common understandings at the heart of these partnerships, which they attend to regularly, and integrate into a larger understanding of the goals they are pursuing.

To be trustworthy leaders, then, we need to make a serious commitment to a network of partnerships that are honest and effective, solid and sophisticated and above all remain capable of receiving candid critique. Enlisting others—and not just loyal insiders—in these alliances becomes a major part of the leader's task: inviting a mutual exploration of what happened when things go awry, coming together to assess behaviors that may be undermining the alliance, taking explicit steps to reinforce shared commitments, revisiting the inspiration from which the collaboration draws its meaning.
Resist the Use of Force

Third, I believe that trustworthy leaders consciously resist the use of force except as a last resort. Leadership is by definition the exercise of power, and leaders are constantly called upon to deploy their power on one side or another of high-stakes disputes. As tempting as it is to wade in with what looks like decisiveness, in our hearts we know that interventions imposed from on high seldom yield enduring peace. Refusing to resort to force is never easy. It’s painful to look like a weak or uncertain leader, a judgment our culture is quick to apply as we grope for simple solutions to complex problems.

But it’s even more painful to watch disputes smolder and re-ignite in debilitating cycles of repetition and escalation. Avoiding the use of force reflects a conception of leadership as nonpartisan, and of the leader as the person whose effectiveness depends on hearing all sides of a dispute, in essence taking in the many perspectives that comprise the whole. If we become captive of one or more of these voices, then soon we are waging a war within ourselves. As leaders, our task is to create conditions within which disputes can be explored and transformed at the most local level where those most directly affected can assume responsibility and discover their own resourcefulness.

Value Differences

Fourth, knowing that differences of opinion, perspective, and world-view are a crucial part of life and learning, we will be trustworthy leaders if we truly value differences, not only as an ethical imperative and a measure of respect for others (although surely for these reasons), but also as a unique creative resource. In any group, organization, or system, the voices from the margins hold the buried wisdom that can alert us to our self-deceptions.
There are aspects of any culture to which resistance is a healthy response. We need a new language, then, about how we understand differences, and a new kind of leadership that will engage identity struggles in diverse communities by appreciating their complexity and messiness, digging beneath the power dimensions, and opening to profounder meanings and deeper human connections. Only when we have leaders who understand healthy conflict in its inevitability and its productivity will we begin to develop the skills to mine it well. We as leaders need to hone those skills—and that tolerance for complexity—so that others can. And it’s never easy.

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Cultivate Sustaining Communities

That’s why, fifth, and finally, trustworthy leaders need to weave communities that can function as sustaining systems of mutual support. All leaders need places to which they can retreat to grapple with pressures and doubts and the assaults on confidence no one should have to confront alone. I know from years of experience how isolating leadership can be, how sudden, wide, and unnerving, sometimes, the swings can be from elation to despair, how often, even now, I lose and find myself again: my moorings, my equilibrium, my commitment, my heart.

If we can practice our leadership within supportive communities—if we can build and bind those communities—then we can begin to define and experience leadership as a collective project that derives its power and authority from a cooperative attachment to mutually-defined commitments and values. Having done so, we can perhaps free ourselves and others of the illusion that we could or should try to accomplish our goals on our own—to trust that we don’t have to carry the whole load, that we can co-create with each other, that we need do only what we can do, and bring only what is ours to give. And that we must bring our very best so others can as well.

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