

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, May 12, 2016: “Good leaders must be ready to understand.” Casper Star Tribune, May 14: “Good leaders keep an open mind.”

Most people strive to be competent in life—as parent, teacher, spouse, supervisor. To this end, some of us periodically ask ourselves: How is my perspective-taking? And, equally as important: Am I persuadable? Thus we begin to recognize ourselves as leaders.

To be persuadable, I must be willing to change my mind in the face of new evidence, or when a situation arises that renders prior thinking obsolete. It means treating my beliefs, no matter how confidently I hold them, as temporary and subject to change. It means keeping in mind the possibility I could be wrong, that my current beliefs are judgments about the truth, not the truth writ large. It means taking the perspective of another person—walking a mile in her or his moccasins, as the saying goes. Changing one’s mind is not a weakness as sometimes believed; indeed, it is the road to acquiring wisdom.

Al Pittampalli has written a wise and helpful book, “Persuadable: How Great Leaders Change Their Minds to Change the World.” A business consultant who has helped organizations transform themselves into more efficient, enjoyable workplaces--Boeing, Hertz, Nokia, even NASA have benefitted from his guidance--he has put together a manual anyone can take to heart.

The examples he gives of high-ranking decision-makers who have become successful in leadership roles range from military to business executives. He begins with Admiral William McRaven who led the SEAL team that brought down Osama bin Laden in 2011, all the while in close communication with President Obama. McRaven’s most astounding characteristic? His humility. The author contrasts him with General George S. Patton, the “headstrong authoritarian with a big ego, unmatched audacity, and immutable resolve.”

A female individual he cites is Debbie Sterling, a Stanford graduate who wondered why so few women were interested in her field of mechanical engineering. So, she created GoldieBlox for the “pink isle” to complement boys’ Legos and Lincoln Logs. When she faced a crisis for using a variant of the Beastie Boys song “Girls” in her ads, rather than stay the course, she apologized and made amends: she’d been unaware that the now-deceased Adam Yauch of the Boys had stipulated in his will that none of his songs be used in advertisements.

Another astounding example is Billy Graham, a white Southern preacher who in college began to reflect on his family’s long-standing racist beliefs. When he became convinced that racism was against God’s law of compassion and love, his change of heart helped propel the civil rights movement.

Here is Pittampalli’s tactic—which, incidentally, he puts to use within his own family: Take pride in being persuadable. Update your beliefs incrementally. Remind yourself, there are no sacred beliefs. Give up the false comfort of black-and-white thinking; consider shades of gray instead.

Confidence, conviction, and consistency, are often thought to be hallmarks of outstanding leadership. Not in Pittampalli's book. He shows how these qualities can become liabilities, whereas "humility and radical open-mindedness are powerful leadership assets."

Sometimes we lack the willingness to see the truth because it threatens something we care about. The author quotes Upton Sinclair: "It's impossible to make a man understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it." But the most powerful resistance we put up happens when the truth threatens our identity. We all hold certain cherished beliefs about ourselves, with no desire to change these. So, we become defensive and guard our beliefs, or we bury our head in the sand. We do this even when it's to our detriment. That's because we often overestimate the fallout, were we to change, while underestimating the benefits.

It's a fact that political leaders, by virtue of their positions of power, have a difficult time understanding the opinion of others. Few people in power are persuadable, observes Pittampalli. Powerful people are the ones with the big egos and the resources to match; they see no reason to consider other people's perspectives. However, any of us are subject to "diminished perspective-taking." Powerful or not, we are often heavily anchored to our own opinion, and we expect that other people will share our views. Romantic relationships often fall victim to this conundrum, since couples rarely share power equally. When one person holds more relationship-power than the partner, this individual often turns unwilling to take the other's perspective.

We can turn perspective-taking from handicap into asset by asking ourselves: "When and where will I do X?" In other words, "When and where will I take my child's, my spouse's, my subordinate's perspective?" This question frames our "implementation intention." Perspective-taking follows naturally, an exercise in reflection, consideration, and thoughtful rumination.

To lead, we need to be understood. But to be understood, we first need to understand. Rather than waste endless effort trying to persuade others, we should render ourselves persuadable.