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The Yellow Brick Road

Skills and Professional Development



As a kid, I looked forward to watching *The Wizard of Oz*. Even now as an adult, I stop to watch it when I'm flipping through the channels. Recently, as I was watching the movie, it occurred to me that the life lessons contained within are good leadership lessons as well.

If you've never seen the movie or don't remember the plot, it's about a young girl named Dorothy who finds herself in a far away land after a tornado lifts up her house and deposits it directly on top of the Wicked Witch of the East — the evil ruler of the Munchkin people. The witch's sister, the Wicked Witch of the West, sets out to avenge her sister's death. Luckily, Dorothy is protected by Glenda the Good Witch — who places enchanted ruby slippers on her feet. However, Dorothy is still far from home, and no one in Munchkinland, including Glenda, has ever heard of Kansas. So, they send her along the yellow brick road to Oz, the Emerald City, to meet the all powerful and all knowing Wizard who, they're confident, will help her return home.

As the rest of the story unfolds, we journey with Dorothy to Oz. Along the way, she picks up three new friends, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion — each of whom must face their own challenges on the way to the Emerald City.

While travelling along our own yellow brick road to leadership, we should remember: (1) we have a road that takes us from where we are to where we want to go; (2) there will always be obstacles and challenges that will distract us from our goal; and (3) everything we need for the journey is already contained within us.

Like Dorothy, our journey to leadership starts wherever we are and ends at our particular destination. We have to know what we want and why, and be firmly committed to the journey. Otherwise, when the winds of life blow, we will be tempted to give up due to fatigue, frustration, or fear.

So what keeps us from reaching our leadership Oz? The fear of learning that we don't know everything, the fear of the unknown, the fear that we don't belong, and the fear of not finding our way to our desired destination.

The key to dealing with fear is facing it head-on. One powerful method is to talk to ourselves like we would a friend. Rarely do we let those we care about revel in untruths about themselves. It's time that we do the same for ourselves.

The truth is that we can't know everything and, in fact, we don't need to know everything in order to be an effective leader. If more knowledge is necessary to do well in our jobs, in our relationships, or in life, the answer is simple — make a plan to increase knowledge in those areas.

No matter how fearful we are, the future is filled with unknowns and that will not change. We cannot and will not know what the future holds until it is here. We wouldn't let a friend hide or not pursue their dreams because they don't know what lies ahead. Our discomfort with the future is something that we can learn to embrace by looking back on our lives and realizing that we have succeeded and survived the unknown before.

One of the toughest fears to deal with is the fear of not belonging. Unfortunately, we cannot make other people accept us. However, we can trust that we are good enough as we are. It's helpful to remember that this fear is not so much about our own insecurities as much as it is about the insecurities of those who exclude us. That said, as leaders, being self-aware requires us to explore the reasons why we may not fit in and discover possible ways to adapt. For instance, if we recently ascended to a leadership position, it may simply be a matter of time before we belong.

Finally, there is the fear of not achieving our goals. Honestly, we have to accept that we may not achieve everything we set out to do. While we, as goal setters and achievers, have a history of achievement, there are no guarantees that any particular goal will be obtained.

In the end, just like Dorothy and her entourage, getting to the end of the yellow brick road is about facing your fears and continually putting one foot in front of the other. And when something happens that takes us off our path, it is imperative that we get back on track at the earliest opportunity.

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