

Leaders and Leadership: Let's Look at these Words By Bob Young

While the etymology of a word does not provide a current definition, understanding the root, origin, and past usage of a word can help us understand the present.

What is the origin of the word "lead?" The *Arcade Dictionary of Word Origins* gives two roots. One is related to the metal, spelled the same but pronounced differently, which "may have come...from an Indo-European source meaning 'flow' (a reference to the metal's low melting point)." The second suggests that the word originated in the "prehistoric West and North Germanic laithjan." Laithjan is derived from laitho, meaning way or journey. Related words include Old English lǣdan, Dutch leiden and German leiten, from which also we get our English words load and lode. *The Online Etymology Dictionary (TOED)* gives the following etymology of lead as a verb: "to guide," Old English *lædan* "cause to go with one, lead, guide, conduct, carry; sprout forth; bring forth, pass (one's life)," causative of *liðan* "to travel," from West Germanic *laidjan* (cf. Old Saxon *lithan*, Old Norse *liða* "to go," Old High German *ga-lidan* "to travel," Gothic *ga-leiþan* "to go"), from PIE **leit-* "to go forth." Etymologically, lead is related to movement or a journey, causing one to go or helping along the way.

The relationship to the heavy metal (German, *Lot* "weight, plummet") gives a set of usages related to heaviness: lead balloon, lead-footed (slow), and lead-footed (a heavy foot on the accelerator). The concept of heaviness in relationship to leaders is interesting.

In medieval times the word began to take on specific usages. Usage as a noun, "action of leading," developed in the 14th century; and the idea of being "in first place" developed in the late 14th century. Lead in reference to "the front or leading place" is from the mid-16th century. The use of the noun in card-playing comes from 1742; in theater, from 1831; in journalism, from 1912; in jazz bands, from 1934 (*TOED*).

Leadership, referring to the "position of a leader," is used in 1821, e.g. "He aspires to leadership." By the end of the 19th century, the word came to include "characteristics necessary to be a leader," (perhaps combining leader + shape), e.g. "He exhibits leadership." As a noun, leadership now means (1) the position or function of a leader, a person who guides or directs a group: He managed to maintain his leadership of the party despite heavy opposition; synonyms: administration, management, directorship, control, governorship, stewardship, hegemony; (2) the ability to lead: As early as sixth grade she displayed remarkable leadership potential; synonyms: authoritativeness, influence, command, effectiveness; sway, clout; (3) an act or instance of leading; guidance; direction: They prospered under his strong leadership (4) the leaders of a group: The union leadership agreed to arbitrate (*TOED*).

The idea of "being in first place, in a leading role, or at the front," a major feature of leadership in modern times, is considerably different from earlier usages which reflect moving on a journey, e.g. "leading one's life."

Leadership, as a word, has a history of less than 200 years, but the concept is much older. Biblically, the patriarchs were leaders. Israel had elders as early as Exodus 3:16 (the first biblical

reference to elders). Parents are charged with spiritual leadership (Deuteronomy 6). Other leaders in Israel are described as prophets, judges, and kings. The judges (shophatim) were rulers, military leaders, and also presided over legal hearings. In a pre-modern sense, all of these groups were leaders and exercised leadership in Israel. The modern and post-modern concept of leadership most often refers to a set of traits or characteristics. These may or may not reflect an exemplary life. For example, leadership may be based on financial success, being well-known (celebrity status), or specific skill sets (athletics or entertainment). In our society, celebrities, athletes, and entertainers are more apt to be described as leaders than teachers, parents, or craftsmen. In fact, our cultural definitions of leadership tend to separate and exalt certain classes of people. We may speak of those who are leaders and those who are not.

What does it mean to lead? Who is a leader? What is leadership? Who can be a leader? How do responses to these questions change when one begins with a biblical foundation? How have the influences of our culture altered the usual responses to these questions?