



ANDERSON SERANGOON JUNIOR COLLEGE

JC 2 Preliminary Examination 2020

GENERAL PAPER

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PAPER 2

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Simba Delyon considers the evolution of leadership.

- 1 When we look back at the annals of history in search of the genesis of the term "leadership", we would find that people have been thinking about it for a very long time. Plato, Confucius, and the poet (or poets) who wrote the Bhagavad Gita expounded on the qualities of leadership. A great deal of time was spent thinking about how leadership qualities might be detected so that leaders could be identified in advance of their elevation. Historians have documented the lives and decisions of individual leaders for years. However, these records have yet to contain the kind of systematic description one would need in order to say that someone has leadership qualities. These attempts to create the science of leadership began around a century ago, but have met with little success. 5
- 2 Early leadership experts had remained nostalgic for traditional leaders. In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, academics studying leadership such as Thomas Carlyle, who wrote "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History", attempted to isolate the character traits of "great men" from history. These leadership experts elaborated on a trait model of leadership. They proposed that leaders were an exclusive group of individuals endowed with certain personality traits—courage, decisiveness, intelligence, attractiveness, and so on—that made them instant leaders. By the mid-twentieth century, alternative models of leadership emerged. After rigorous studies about the psychology and experiences of leaders, many have settled on a process-based approach. Leadership has come to be seen as something that develops in stages within individuals. In trying to accomplish a goal, an individual is put through more challenging work, he rises to the occasion (or he flounders) and he gains leadership skills in the process. This heralds a more democratic selection of leaders—anyone can be a leader. 10 15 20
- 3 With the shifting sands of technological change in the 21st century, every company and nation needs to consider how to better prepare their current and future leaders to meet the challenges presented by technological disruption. In the last four decades or so, as the world has changed drastically, leaders have also been forced to change—sometimes kicking and screaming. Technology has created unprecedented levels of disruption across numerous industries, forcing leaders to balance multiple challenges while reluctantly navigating change and promoting innovation. In such a climate, successful leaders will not necessarily be the people with the most experience or expertise, but those who possess and develop the key competencies of agile leadership. With 70 percent of people around the world working remotely, virtual teams are already an integral part of many companies. The demands of leading these virtual teams, however, present huge challenges to leaders who are more accustomed to managing face-to-face teams. Effective leaders are able to build trust across virtual teams. They are able to keep team members engaged, building camaraderie even within remote-based teams. In virtual teams, team members may work in different time zones or keep different schedules. The best leaders find ways to set up systems that monitor progress and ensure that everyone remains accountable for their work while avoiding micromanaging. 25 30 35
- 4 Truth be told, leadership may be hard to define, but in times of crisis it is easy to identify. As the Covid-19 pandemic spreads fear, disease and death, national leaders across the globe have been severely tested. The leaders who have gained the respect and attention of their people, and who have succeeded in dulling the impact of the virus, share certain traits worth noting as the pandemic roars on—and for future crises as well. A willingness to take quick and bold action, even when it carries political risk, is surely among the most important hallmarks of leadership in a crisis. It is now obvious that the United States President Donald Trump's attempt to downplay it for far too long proved disastrous. The Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern, by contrast, chose, as she put it, to "go hard and go early" and has brought Covid-19 40 45

to heel. Clearly, some leaders have fallen short (sometimes dismally), but there are those who have risen to the moment. Even in fair weather, elements of effective leadership include respect for rational thought, openness to new information and prompt assurance of financial support when necessary. And also experience: German Chancellor Angela Merkel's background as a scientist is by all accounts a major factor in her credibility, her most compelling attribute as a leader. The qualities of a leader ultimately determines the public's trust in the government and how far the detrimental effects of a crisis can be limited. Good leadership helps prevent contrasting narratives based on untruths from creating confusion.

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5 When a nation or organisation is brought to its knees by a crisis, any leader worth their salt must first seek to calm their followers and unite them in spirit against the seemingly omnipresent danger that they must confront. But beyond manipulations of spin doctors and worldly political advisors are qualities of character that cannot be faked, chiefly compassion, which may be the most important in reassuring a frightened population. Nobody would ever question Angela Merkel's compassion. When she addressed her nation on television, her parting words were: "Take good care of yourselves and your loved ones". Leaders also must be visible with their plans, honest with their words and adaptable with their actions. Political scientist Arjen Boin who has studied the most successful and unsuccessful responses during previous emergencies argues that sound leadership provides people with the infrastructure for making sense of the situation.

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6 In any crisis, there is sometimes a natural temptation to simply wait it out. Leaders of countries and organisations cannot give in to this instinct. Leaders today are facing a perfect storm of economic downturn, a host of social problems and a fast-spreading pandemic. Good leaders know when to persuade and when to cross over to rigid control (a choice that can quickly backfire if it not taken with suitable caution). The ability to do so ensures social stability.

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7 Good leaders recognise that they are part of the process where the longevity of the organisation or institution is the ultimate goal. This is a far cry from the past where the elite were content to roost in their tenure as part of the management and were committed insofar as their sizeable pensions were guaranteed. Just as leaders were coached to their success by their predecessors, they too consistently mentor their successors. People, especially millennials, gravitate to leaders who will coach them to success. According to a report by management consultant McKinsey, when five hundred executives were asked to rank their top three human-capital priorities, leadership development was included as both a current and a future priority. Almost two-thirds of the respondents identified leadership development as their primary concern. When current leaders include the team to develop common goals, team members take pride in what they create and this helps organisations retain talent for years to come. Leaders understand that by entrusting people with responsibilities, people will improve throughout their employment.

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8 To some extent, leaders believe that they are storytellers, but really, they are merely characters in stories. They play leading roles, but in dramas they cannot predict, control and do not always understand. The world is constantly changing, and with that, our judgement and expectations of leaders shift. The definition of leadership that we have struggled with for so long seems to be something that we will continue to struggle with for years to come.

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