Welcome to the Brown University Executive Master podcast series. Professor Robert Allio teaches the leadership course in the Executive Master in Science and Technology Leadership program. According to Professor Allio people can easily identify individuals that they think of as leaders, but they struggle to point out the actual actions of these leaders that resulted in their accomplishments. In this podcast, Professor Allio explains his conundrum by uncovering a key attribute of leadership that results in its illusive nature.

This is the classic dilemma, I think, in teaching about leadership, which is that when I ask participants in a program to identify a leader, of course they'll come up with a list of names—Patton and de Gaulle and Napoleon and so on. But then I say, well, give me some evidence that they were leaders, that these individuals were leaders. And it is very difficult for any of them to identify a specific act of leadership that was exhibited by these individuals.

The leadership act is very elusive. So that has led me to the belief that if you want to talk about whether an individual is a leader or not, you cannot point to a specific incident or a decision that that individual took. What you need to look at instead is whether or not that individual has successfully unified the members of the organization around shared purpose and vision.

That has happened, then you don't need to impute leaderly qualities to any individual. You look at the performance of the organization as a whole. And it's the role of the leader in energizing those members of his organization around the shared purpose and vision—that's the ultimate in my view measure of leadership capability.

Just thinking about this a little further, even when you think about your classic strongman-type leader, they really have to have done this as well.

Exactly. And even of course, the classic example that we always talk about is Napoleon. And Tolstoy's analysis of Napoleon, which said, well look, there's Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo or wherever. And he had actually some earlier more successful campaigns.

But you say, well, what did Napoleon do at that battle which qualifies him as a leader? And what Tolstoy argues is that well, no point in doing that, because what happened on that day is
what Tolstoy argues is that well, no point in doing that, because what happened on that day is the result of thousands of decisions and actions taken by other people leading up to that particular time, and Napoleon just happened to be there. It’s like the Italian proverb-- the right man comes at the right time.

JO LEE: So with that said then, how do you teach leadership if it’s just about being there at the right time?

ROBERT ALLIO: You need to recognize that as a leader, you have limited power, limited authority, except to the degree that you can develop trust, mutual trust between yourself and the members of the organization. So if the members of the organization-- if your team has trust in you, has trust in a collaborative vision, then as a whole, we’ll all move forward together, and I will have judged myself to have been successful as a leader.

JO LEE: And just put this in the context of your course on leadership, in EMSTL, can you talk about how technical professionals go about developing this capacity and maybe some of the specific challenges they face?

ROBERT ALLIO: Right. Well the key, I think, in terms of a skill that leaders need to cultivate and enhance is communication. If you can't communicate, then you are never going to be able to get people to understand where you think you ought to go collectively. So you need to be able, as a leader, to be able to tell a story, tell a really compelling story.

The way Henry V did at Agincourt with his band of brothers, greatly understaffed compared to the French, and yet-- at least according to Shakespeare-- the British were able to go out and achieve a resounding victory. One could argue a la Shakespeare that it was because Henry V was so persuasive in telling the story of why it would be wonderful if we all got together and worked to win this battle. So I think the analogy in the course we teach is that if you can tell a good story, a convincing story, a plausible story based on some facts and based on aspirations, and you tell a story that convinces the members of the organization that what we’re doing together is meaningful, that is, I think, the greatest accomplishment that a leader can realize in his or her role.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JO LEE: Thank you for listening to this podcast. To learn more about Brown University’s Executive Master programs, please visit brown.edu/executive.