Leadership: The Skill Most Needed

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Do you have leadership potential? This article explores the differences between leadership and management, the qualities of a good leader, different leadership styles and where they are effective and not effective, and other issues.

When I entered the chemical engineering profession over 40 years ago, the path to career success was climbing the corporate management ladder. There certainly were career opportunities for those who wanted to stay in technical jobs, but management was “where it’s at.”

Interestingly, those who were successful technically were often the people who were most considered for management positions. Management skills were frequently learned through on-the-job experience. There was little in the way of managerial training. Those who demonstrated managerial ability were further promoted and those who did not remained at “their level of incompetence.” Because they were not effective managers, they relied on the skills they had, which were technical. As a result, they micromanaged their subordinates, often second-guessing them. This, obviously, created a number of organizational and personnel problems.

Fortunately, today, that is much less the case. First, many more opportunities exist for those who wish to pursue a purely technical career. These technical tracks are often comparable to the management track, in regard to both status and financial remuneration. For those who are interested in management, better training is available to help equip them for the unique challenges that they will face as managers. One set of skills that is especially helpful to managers is leadership skills.

Management

A traditional definition of management is “responsibility for the work of other people.” Hersey and Blanchard (1) define it as “working with and through individuals and groups to accomplish organizational goals.” Managers achieve this through a number of key functions: planning, organizing, controlling and motivating.

Planning involves setting goals and objectives for the organization. Organizing is creating the appropriate structure and obtaining and allocating the necessary resources to achieve the goals. Controlling involves creating systems for measurement of progress against goals, feedback and follow-up to assure that progress is appropriate. Controlling also includes developing contingency plans to handle deviations. Motivating is creating an atmosphere in the organization that enhances performance.

To some managers (in those early days I spoke of before), motivating meant getting the most out of people by whatever means necessary. Motivation came from fear. Subordinates feared the power of the manager to impact, and even control, their careers. Relationships between managers and subordinates were often paternalistic — “the boss knows what is best for you, and if you obey, you will be taken care of.”
Generally, the skills required to effectively carry out the necessary management functions did not require much proficiency in what we call the "soft skills" — teambuilding, relationships, empowerment, etc. However, students of management theory observed that some managers were more successful than others were. Their organizations were more productive and more enthusiastic, and experienced fewer turnovers and more commitment. These managers had skills that went beyond the traditional management skills. They were leaders as well as managers.

What is leadership?

One simple definition of leadership (1) is “influencing the behavior of an individual or group.” Note that, by this definition, a person need not be a manager to be a leader. The most important part of influencing another’s behavior is the leader’s own behavior. The leader’s own behavior is determined by the skills — the leadership skills — that he or she possesses.

What are these leadership skills? Various leadership theories exist; here we will consider three popular ones. As you read the following sections, think about your career and the people you were willing and happy to follow. What about them made you feel that way? Did they possess any of these skills?

Seven habits

You’re probably familiar with the seven habits of highly effective people, articulated by Stephen Covey in his bestselling book (2):

1. Be proactive. A leader does not wait for things to happen and then react to them. The leader takes control of his or her life and thus seizes the initiative.

2. Begin with the end in mind. Leaders have a vision — for themselves and for their organization — and a mission for achieving it.

3. Put first things first. A leader will make sure that the most important things — the activities that further the vision and are consistent with the vision — are done first and will not get bogged down in extraneous matters.

The first three habits address primarily the leader’s own personal approach. The next three deal with interpersonal leadership.

4. Think win/win. The leader is committed to developing relationships in which all parties are winners.

5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. If a leader is going to influence the behavior of a follower, it is important to understand not only the task to be performed, but also where that individual stands. Another way of saying this is diagnose before you prescribe.

6. Synergize. Synergy occurs when people are open to new ideas and new concepts, when diversity (in the broadest sense) is valued, when people are encouraged to “think outside the box,” when communication is open. The effective leader who will create the environment for this to happen.

7. Sharpen the saw. An effective leader will take the time to make sure that his/her tools (skills) remain sharp. This is done through the process of renewal: physical, mental, social/emotional and spiritual.

Ten commitments

Kouzes and Posner (3) have identified what they call the ten commitments of leadership. These are contained within five fundamental practices of exemplary leadership:

A. Challenging the process:

1. Search out challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate and improve.

2. Experiment, take risks and learn from the accompanying mistakes.

B. Inspiring a shared vision:

3. Envision an uplifting and ennobling future.

4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes and dreams.

C. Enabling others to act:

5. Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.

6. Strengthen people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support.

D. Modeling the way:

7. Set the example by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values. Walk the talk.

8. Achieve small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment.

E. Encouraging the heart:

9. Recognize individual contributions to the success of every project.

10. Celebrate team accomplishments regularly.

Twenty-one laws

We have seen seven habits, five practices, and ten commitments for effective leaders. But, in the numbers game, John Maxwell wins the prize — he articulated 21 irrefutable laws of leadership (4), such as:

- Leadership ability determines a person’s level of effectiveness.
- The true meaning of leadership is influence.
- Leadership develops daily, not in a day.
- Anyone can steer the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course.
- Trust is the foundation of leadership.
- People naturally follow leaders stronger than themselves.
- Good leaders are intuitive — they can read the situation, trends, resources, people and themselves.
- Who you are is whom you attract.
- Leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand.
- A leader’s potential is determined by those closest to him or her.
- People buy into the leader, then the vision.
• Leaders find ways for the team to win; defeat is not an option.
• Leaders can create momentum, but it is easier to sustain it than create it.
• Leaders understand that activity is not necessarily accomplishment.
• A leader must give up to go up — the more responsibility you have, the fewer rights you have.
• When to lead is as important as what to do and where to go.
• A leader's lasting value is measured by succession. Your success as a leader is measured by how well the people you have developed can lead the organization to greater things without you.

Characteristics of an effective leader

We could have looked at a number of other authors on the subject, but these are a few examples of the "theory of leadership." Let's consider what they have in common and the characteristics of an effective leader.

Leaders must have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. They must also have identified the mission for reaching that vision. The vision and mission could be broad — as for an entire organization — or narrow — as for a specific project or objective. Leaders evaluate actions against the mission. But they must also be flexible and adaptable to deal positively with unforeseen circumstances.

They must communicate these to their followers and get the necessary buy-in and commitment. To do this, leaders must first understand their followers: how they feel, what their capabilities are, where their interests lie, and what concerns they have. Based on this understanding, they can then determine what type of interaction (leadership style) will be most effective at getting the followers to embrace the vision and mission as their own.

Leaders create an environment where diversity is valued, open communication is encouraged, creative thinking is enhanced, and new and unique ideas are sought and welcomed.

Leaders will be focused on results, but will be equally focused on people. They will encourage, reward, develop and involve their followers. They will seek input and feedback, delegate and empower. They will continue to learn and to seek opportunities to learn.

Leaders will be involved. Interaction is critical. They will lead the way, but also share the load — and the risks.

In relationships with followers, leaders recognize that trust is a key ingredient and will seek to build and maintain trust. Think of this as maintaining a bank account. In order to take something out, you first must have something on deposit. So leaders will invest in their followers before they ask for something in return. They will strive to maintain a positive balance. If they must take out more than they have put in, they will make sure that it is paid back — with interest (it's a loan). To do this, they need collater-
al — an already established positive relationship. Above all, they will avoid "bad checks" — behaviors on their part that will result in insufficient funds (loss of trust). Some examples of bad checks are taking undue credit, blaming others for your own mistakes, being duplicitous, assuming a level of competence you don't have, showing favoritism, lying, and being unreliable.

Kouzes and Posner conducted two surveys of over 20,000 participants, one in 1987 and one in 1995, which produced almost identical results (3). The respondents were asked to list the seven qualities they most look for and admire in a leader, someone whose directions they would willingly follow. The top ten qualities (in descending order of importance) were:

1. honest
2. forward-looking
3. inspiring
4. competent
5. fair-minded
6. supportive
7. broad-minded
8. intelligent
9. straightforward
10. dependable.

Over half of the respondents cited the first four characteristics as important in a leader.

Leadership style

Leadership style, or the behavior of a leader in interacting with others, is most important in determining a leader's effectiveness. Based on the discussion up to this point, one might think that a leader only needs to follow a set of behaviors regardless of the situation and he or she will be successful. That is not necessarily the case. Indeed, different situations will call for different leadership styles. Hersey and Blanchard (1) have addressed this issue in what they call situational leadership.

The effectiveness of a leadership style depends on two primary things: the task to be accomplished and the ability and willingness of the follower to carry out the task. This is called follower readiness. Leadership styles are made up of two types of behavior: task, or directive, behavior; and relationship, or supportive, behavior. The relative amounts of these two behaviors and the elements that make up each determine a specific leadership style. Let's look at some examples.

To determine the best style to use, the leader must first understand the task. Then he or she must evaluate the readiness of the follower to carry out that task. Suppose that the follower is both unwilling and unable to carry out the task. In that case, the leader's style should be high task behavior and low relationship behavior. To overcome lack of ability, task behavior would include issuing specific instructions and monitoring closely to help the follower learn and to make sure that task perfor-
mance is appropriate. Relationship behavior would include sharing reasons, explaining rationale and trying to get buy-in to increase willingness. The primary focus is on accomplishing the task.

If the follower is willing but unable, the leader’s style should be high task and high relationship. Task behavior would be similar to that above, but relationship behavior would focus more on positive support, encouragement and reward for learning and accomplishment.

On the other hand, if the follower is able but unwilling, the style is low task and high relationship. Task behavior is low because the follower is competent and knows how to carry out the task. Relationship behavior is similar to the first case, where the leader is selling the concept, but it is also more participatory because the follower understands the task and can share in idea generation and decision-making.

Finally, if the follower is both willing and able, the best style is low task, low relationship. The leader defines the task and “gets out of the way.” This is essentially delegation.

Note that low task does not mean no task. The leader must always be concerned with meeting objectives and with performance. Similarly, low relationship doesn’t mean no relationship. The leader should always be concerned about the follower and be supportive, but the nature of that support may change as the leader’s style changes.

Hersey and Blanchard found that we all have a style with which we are most comfortable and to which we naturally gravitate, regardless of the situation. In their research, they developed an instrument that leaders can use to evaluate their tendency toward the various styles. They found that most people either have a primary and a secondary style or two styles that are almost equal in preference.

It should be pointed out that there is no right style. Each style can be the best in a certain situation. The key to effective leadership is style flexibility — the ability to use different styles in different situations. And the key to flexibility is usually not ability — it is willingness.

Interestingly, many U.S. managers have combinations of styles that are high relationship. If they are inflexible in those styles, they will encounter several problems. First, they can’t deal effectively with immature work groups or discipline problems. Second, they cannot delegate. I suspect that many engineers have combinations of styles that are low relationship. If inflexible, this leads to an evaluation of subordinates based on competency. If they are thought to be competent, they are left alone; if not, they will be closely supervised. These people are good at crisis intervention. They are not good at developing followers.

These types of leadership styles can also be used on persons other than organizational subordinates. Recall the earlier definition of leadership — influencing the behavior of an individual or group. Suppose you want to lead your boss to carry out a task. You can apply the same techniques. This will probably require high relationship behavior. The boss is not likely to respond well to being told what to do and how to do it, nor is he or she likely to do it if left alone. If the boss is willing but unable, you might want to bounce ideas or carry out shared problem-solving. If the boss is able but unwilling, the challenge is getting buy-in.

Where do leaders come from?
I firmly believe that some leaders are born. They innately have many of the necessary characteristics to be a leader. Somewhere along the way, they also developed the desire to be leaders. This is very important because without the willingness to lead, ability will count for very little.

Other leaders (probably most, in my opinion) are made. They may have some of the skills but need to develop others through perseverance, practice and consistent application. It takes effort to become a leader and it takes time. As Maxwell says (4), leadership develops daily, not in a day. Again, the key is willingness. Most of

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