



Two Sides of the Same Coin



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Leaders or Managers, Pt. 1

It is widely believed that the activities of leaders and managers are diametrically opposed to one another. For example, leaders overcome circumstances, but managers just give into them; leaders look at the evidence before making a decision, but managers only do what they're told; leaders do the right things, but managers do them in the right way.

There's also confusion regarding the standard of performance in these two roles. Many think that the effectiveness of leaders should not be evaluated because success depends on so many factors outside of their control. The efficiency of managers, however, is considered to be something worthy of measurement, because it reflects the degree to which they have complied with the organization's directives.

It's worth reminding ourselves, however, that while some people are better leaders than they are managers or better managers than leaders, that that doesn't mean that good leaders have no managerial responsibilities or that good managers are not expected to provide leadership. In fact, people who predominantly fill one role more than the other are judged on how well they perform both. Deficiencies in one tend to downgrade the perception of their competence in everything. In other words, an incompetent leader who has exceptional managerial ability is likely to be thought of as mediocre overall. The same holds true for many capable leaders who lack managerial ability. The truly outstanding leaders, the ones that we remember the most, may not have been outstanding managers, but they were astute enough to surround themselves with people who were and to heed their counsel.

In our two-sided world, the one in which those who lead or manage are separated from those who are led or managed, it is worth considering what leaders think they ought to do as compared to what the led think they ought to do; and similarly, to evaluate what managers

think they ought to do as compared to what the managed think they ought to do. This month, we'll consider leader behaviors, and then next month we'll look at the behavior of managers.

What is leadership?

What is leadership? There is no agreed definition. In fact, there are almost as many answers to this question as people to ask. Consult your friends, and you'll see what I mean. Although there are various shades of meaning, most definitions allude to the idea that leaders influence others to behave in a particular way without appealing to written rules. No doubt there will be people who argue with this definition; but it seems to me that there is a distinction between those who appeal to a written code and those who don't. Adhering to written procedures is something that managers, by definition, do. So, it stands to reason that leaders must do something else.

Have you ever watched a group of children playing together? Usually, it doesn't take very long for one to adopt a leadership role. Sometimes, one of non-leaders will try to lead or make some comment to the effect that he or she wants to be the leader; but this is usually to no avail. I've noticed that even when the group gives in, that the person who wanted to lead often doesn't know what to do, and then the leadership torch is automatically passed to the one who does. Why does this happen? It's because leadership behavior is something that followers recognize.

In a recent study, I identified five behaviors that followers look for in leaders. Good leaders do them, but poor leaders don't.

In the first place, leaders are visionaries. They look into the future, determine what it holds, and the place their organization has in it. Have you ever tried to follow a dog that has been taken off a leash? The dog doesn't know where it's going. It's just following its nose. You may chase after it for awhile, but eventually you'll probably stop, observe its general direction and then head that way. Now you're not following; instead, you're trying to figure out what the dog will do next, which is a futile exercise because it doesn't know either. There are people in leadership positions who behave like this. Many of them have no vision. No one will follow someone who doesn't have some idea of where he or she is going. This is not a deliberate act of defiance; rather, it's more a sense of wondering where the leader is going so that following becomes *possible*.

Sometimes the perception is that the leader has no goals or has goals, but has no plans for accomplishing them. In such cases, there won't be any followers either, at least not willing ones. It's the uncertainty in the leader that produces the hesitation in the ranks. It's a vicious circle. Everyone seems to be waiting for everyone else. Conversely, those who do have a clear sense of where they are going or want to go and are willing to step out in that direction with confidence, will have followers, because those who are not leaders want to follow those who are.

A second characteristic of leaders is that they have the support of those they lead. Leaders may have a vision, goals and a plan, but if they are unable to communicate them to those who will follow, then the end result will be the same as if they didn't have these things. Many of you will be familiar with the 1970s sitcom *Fawlty Towers*, a program whose stories were centered on the events that occurred at an English bed-and-breakfast. Many foreigners stayed at this establishment. Basil Fawlty, the proprietor, looked down his long nose at all who didn't speak English, especially the Germans, and his Spanish waiter, Manuel. Frequently, Basil would launch into a long tirade about, well almost anything, at the end of which Manuel would utter one word: "Que?" (What?); whereupon Fawlty would slap him on the side of the head, and ask in an exasperating tone, "Haven't you been listening to anything I've been saying?"

True leaders will patiently explain what they're trying to accomplish as often as is necessary. They want their followers to understand the vision and to take ownership for achieving the goals. Those in leadership roles who are not true leaders, however, will simply browbeat their followers for being stupid or insubordinate. Few things will demoralize a work force faster.

A third characteristic is that the best leaders are focused on visions that are much bigger than they are. Those in leadership roles who take on these positions so that they can serve themselves actually obstruct the achievement of their goals. Their behavior reinforces the short, rather than the longer-term. This is usually because they intend to leave as soon as they get what they want. When everyone understands and is committed to the vision, the leader is seen as the person that will help the group advance toward it; but, when everyone except the leader is committed to it, the led will only follow for as long as they believe that the leader is committed to the cause. Once it becomes clear that the leader is in it for himself or herself,

the followers will rapidly become stragglers and eventually stop following altogether. True leadership is a selfless undertaking. It involves sacrificing oneself for something that is much bigger. It is doing what that person knows to be the right thing to do under the circumstances regardless of the consequences.

A fourth characteristic is that leaders take action as soon as the situation calls for it. Poor leaders believe that the time is never right to do anything; that it's better to 'wait and see.' Of course, if you wait long enough, the circumstances might decide for you, or they might change sufficiently to warrant a further period of 'wait and see.' Followers, on the other hand, will want to act upon their convictions. Often they will be unwilling to wait for reluctant leaders. The reticent leader is one who wants to let the dust settle or to secure the present position before doing anything as drastic as leading people in a different direction. Few of them, however, have considered what they will do if the dust doesn't settle or how long they will wait to see if it does.

A fifth characteristic is that leaders lead. Sounds terribly obvious, I know; but some in leadership positions don't see the need to lead at all. They believe that whatever worked before will continue to work. Of course, this is nothing more or less than wishful thinking. It doesn't take a particular wisdom to recognize that the world of work is changing so quickly that whatever worked in the past is probably out-of-date already. In these circumstances, those who are able to are likely to abandon ship rather than wait for the ship to sink in the slough of the status quo.

So there you have it: Five characteristics of leadership: 1) They have a vision of what to do, and goals and plans for getting them there; 2) they are able to communicate these things to those they lead; 3) they are serving a cause that is bigger than themselves; 4) they are willing to take action straightaway; and 5) they actually lead. If you are in a leadership position, my challenge to you is to take an honest look at yourself in light of each of these. Ask yourself if you are doing them and, if you are already doing them, then ask how you can do them better.