

The Task of Leadership

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I spent a few minutes browsing in the Management stacks of my local mega bookstore, as I thought about this talk:

- 10 Axioms for Business Success
- 10 Steps to Empowerment
- 10 New Ideas Revolutionizing Business
- Mastering the 4 styles of leadership
- 5 Pillars of TQM
- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People
- 20 Keys to Workplace Improvement
- 31 Leadership Secrets from GE's Jack Welch
- 101 Creative Problem Solving Techniques
- 301 Great Management Ideas
- 501 Business Leads
- 1042 Tips for confident communication

I had two associations to these lists. The first is to bullet points, as if emanating from an overhead projector to underscore and reinforce the key elements of a lecture. They are aids to memory. My second association is to the inspirational style of self-help books and 12 step programs. I don't mean this as a disparaging remark at all, but more as a striking resemblance. I will come back to this second thought later.

The point I want to start with is that such lists, like bullet points, don't create dialogue; they are aimed at the business leader who wants to or feels he needs to figure out all by himself what to do. They are aids to his or her memory.

In other words, such an approach to leadership assumes that the important thing is to get the key ideas about leadership into the leader -- as if it were a language, say, like French or Russian -- or the text of a manual on repairing engines -- and that once these key ideas were inside the leader, then he or she would then speak leadership or do leadership properly. The idea, in short is that leadership is the property of the individual, a set of ideas or talents that could be possessed by an individual.

Many of these books are written by CEOs, or they are based on the supposed wisdom of successful CEOs, the ultimate proof that such

business leaders have reached the cult status of contemporary prophets. Others are written by professional gurus, riding the top of best seller lists, who sell their expensive services as management consultants or trainers. Nowadays, clearly, they can even hope to be called to the White House.-- as Billy Graham once was.

Clearly they fill a need that collectively resides in us: We want men and women we can believe in, larger than life figures, who don't convey doubt or uncertainty. In short we don't want real people who struggle with problems that are all too familiar to us; we are looking for heroes, people who always know what to do.

This tendency is powerfully embedded in our history and culture. From the beginning, we have been mesmerized by the figures of bold adventurers, brave founding fathers, visionary presidents, robber barons, brilliant inventors, shrewd investors and sharp business leaders whose stories seem to account for the collective achievements of this country. Ours is a culture that is constantly awarding the prize to individuals, neglecting the team members whose contributions were indispensable and indistinguishable. We give Oscars, Nobel Prizes, "genius awards", honorary doctorates knowing as the recipients often know what a travesty it is to single out individuals. The fact of the matter, though, is that despite this official history that stresses the heroic achievement of individuals, everything that has been built in this country is the product of collective effort.

Lincoln "freed slaves and saved the Union," for example. But what about the thousands of abolitionists who created the moral climate to oppose slavery, or who manned the underground railroad, the senators and representatives juggling myriads of interests, the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who fought, or the manufacturers seeking new markets? As Tolstoy pointed out in War and Peace, thinking of Napoleon and Czar Alexander: "In historical events, the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have the smallest connection to the events themselves." So too we now look at the stories of our corporate victories and near defeats and we see the labels of Jack Welch, Bill Gates, Lee Iacocca, Ross Perot, Bill Agee, Henry Ford, and so forth.

So let us start out, then, by understanding this this has very little to do with real leadership. What we are talking about when we focus on individual figures such as these is the question of who gets the credit -- or the blame. It's really about celebrity and often about the narcissism of public figures, and it's about a vast projective process in which extremely complex events are simplified and labelled, collective efforts become

represented by individuals who are set apart, endowed with mythic prowess, and worshipped. The other side of this process, of course, is that they can also get blamed. Our pantheon holds villains as well. We blame Hitler -- not the Germans, for example -- and we blame Nixon, and McCarthy, and Millkin. The important point here is that the average person, the you and the me of this complex reality gets factored out. How often do we wonder how much we have contributed to Watergate, or the junk bond crisis or the gulf war. It is the absence of such thoughts in us that is the hallmark of a successful projective process. We project from ourselves the good and the bad -- and in the process disclaim responsibility what what is done. We become innocent by-standers.

The real point of leadership - the interesting point that feels to me worth discussing -- unlike this process -- is the ways in which we enhance our connection to and participation in collective events. How does leadership connect to the me's and you's of this world

The fact of the matter is that leadership is not the property of the individual, is not an attribute of individuals, but a property of the group. It makes no sense to think of leadership apart from two absolutely essentially related questions:

(1) Who is being led? For whom, on whose behalf, does the leader act? Whose "good" or whose "profit" or "need" is served by his or her success or failure?

(2) What is the leadership for? What, in other words, is the task of the goals for which leadership is required?

If you try to define success or failure in any particular case, I don't see how you can even begin to think about it without raising these questions? Success in whose terms? Success or failure with respect to what goals?

If we we take these two sets of questions seriously, what we are forced to see is that the question of leadership is indistinguishable from the group matrix out of which it arises. Leadership from this point of view is a function, a way of making it possible for a group of people to keep in mind their concerted efforts towards a common goal.

Let's look at leadership in the small group context. Pierre Turquet gives a nice example of leadership in a surgical team: "in an operating team, under normal conditions the surgeon is probably in charge. If, however, respiratory embarrassment occurs, the anaesthetist may take over while the surgeon packs the operating site and perhaps acts as assistant to the anaesthetist. When the respiratory crisis is overcome, the surgeon will

again assume the leadership role and continue his operation." He makes the point that not only does leadership shift under such circumstances but also that there is a shifting alignment of all the roles: the surgeon is not discarded or rendered helpless but, rather, assumes a different constructive role under the leadership of the anaesthetist.

Or kids playing a game. How skilled they are in keeping it going, if they are truly engaged in the group enterprise of it, one person taking up where the other leaves off to keep the game going, impasses avoided, conflicts resolved.

Turquet calls the leader in such a context, "The first among equals." and that is extremely important because whoever is first in such an enterprise is first for a time, in so far and for so long as that person's skills are what the group needs to address its purpose most effectively at that moment. He or she is recognized for their contribution, not for some innate superiority. The authority of leadership is not exclusive; it does not subvert or lessen the authority of the others.

Now, of course, this is an ideal model. The fact of the matter is that the leader of a department or a team or a unit or a task force -- or whatever actual organizational unit has been established -- occupies a position which it is his or her responsibility to fill. Formally, leadership is seldom actually passed around. Surgical teams have evolved procedures and common understandings over time and in response to the imperatives of life and death. Most of us are facing new situations with uncertain resources and shifting expectations. And we have people we report to.

So the practical question that needs to be addressed here is this: You are the boss -- how do you take up the task of leadership with an awareness that it is a function of the group, i.e. that it is a task beyond what you as an individual can or should hope to accomplish alone? As a formal leader, how can you make best use of the leadership talents of those who are in the group you formally lead? How do you integrate the pressure to take charge that you are feeling from above and from below with your understanding that you don't and can't have in your person all of what you need in order to do so?

Now that I have framed the problem in such a way as to have either aroused your anxiety or disappointed you, or perhaps both, there are a few things that can I think usefully be said about that.. One is that you do need to keep in mind the fact that there are no rules; every task and every group is sufficiently different to require a fresh approach. In a sense, this is another way to make the point that by yourself you don't know enough not only about the objective problems that are faced by the

group but perhaps more importantly about the resources in the group that are available to deal with it. In other words, you have to keep in mind that you are a member of the group.

The way we put that in the language of group relations: you have to keep in mind that though you may have formal authorization by virtue of the position you occupy in your organization, you have to generate and sustain the informal authorization of those with whom you work. That is to say, you have to find the way to connect them with the task that is the work of the group and with the set of roles that define what members of the group address as their portion of the task -- and in doing so you have to connect them with you. As the leader, you represent the leadership function in the group and the leadership part of every member.

This is not a moral issue: I'm not talking about being considerate towards them or respectful or kind. That's all well and good; and it's probably helpful more often than not. But what I am talking about is keeping them in mind as people who have something to say -- indeed something that has to be said. You may not want to hear it and you may well feel that what they have to say is wrong. They may not know as much as you do, and what they know may seem to be irrelevant. But you have to know it -- just as they have to know what you have to say.

The other side of this -- of being part of them and their being part of you -- is the particular way in which you are different. Yours is a particular role, and that, of course, sets you apart. As the formal leader, you represent the purpose of the group, the reason it has come into being -- or, as we like to say in group relations jargon, the "primary task" of the group, the job it has to do if it is to survive.

This carries several important implications. One, in representing the purpose of the group, you are the link to higher levels of management to which you and your group are accountable. Thus from the perspective of your group, for whom you represent the leadership function, you inevitably encounter the risk of being seen as not belonging to the group at all but rather to higher levels of management, to "them." You run the risk, too, to seeing yourself that way, of being seduced into thinking that that is indeed the primary group to which you belong. There are real reasons why this identification may be promoted: you do have to understand upper management, their dilemmas and the ways in which the work of your group fits into the over all purpose of the larger organization of which it is a part and which they have the responsibility to manage. They will expect that of you. Moreover, your own personal ambition may lead you to aspire to join that group. Far be it from me -- or anyone, I think -- to condemn such ambition, even if it would do any

good to do so. The point here is that it will inevitably contribute to distrust of you in your role in the group to which you actually do belong. You neglect this at your peril.

A second aspect of your differentiated role representing the purpose of the group is that, as a result, you also hold for the group the related sub-tasks of evaluation and assessment. If it is your job as the leader to keep your eye on the prize, that means that you have to function to assess -- or to represent continually for the group -- the assessment process of how the group is working. This relates to over-all functioning and efficiency of the group, how well it is structured to work at the task, and so forth; but it also and most particularly has to do with assessing and evaluating individual members of the group.

This is the aspect of the job that most people love the most, of course, and the part that makes them most lovable. But you can see that it flows inevitably from the nature of the function. That is, it's not just, as we say, part of the job; it has to be part of the job because it is integrally related to the task represented by the leader. But it can be painful, and it is tempting to try to avoid that pain. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that one of the bureaucratic solutions to the pain associated with the work of evaluation has been to take out of the hands of individuals; the consequence is that it becomes routinized and ineffective. Competence and incompetence become impossible to identify, and organizational work gets mired.

Larry Hirshhorn has had an important idea about this dilemma, I think: The leader has to share the risk. The group has to know and understand that they all participate and share the risk of the enterprise. The leader does not purchase immunity by virtue of his position as evaluator, representing the task of evaluation. He is accountable above to his superiors -- vulnerable directly because of the ability of those he is working with to function effectively. Moreover, the leader runs the risk of not doing his job as well as he needs to -- including the job of assessment -- and whether or not he allows himself to be aware of it, he is, in fact, being continually evaluated by members of the group. Or maybe "judged" is more like it.

One way of restating this problem, perhaps, is that the task of the leader is to convert the tendency to judge others -- making them into the repository of idealizing or contemptory projections -- into real on-going self-reflective assessments. And clearly in doing this, he cannot let himself off the hook. Indeed, he can model the process.

Let me describe a recent consulting experience that brought home these issues to me in a new way. I won't focus on the consultation itself, which is still going on. But I would like to describe what I came to learn about the leadership experience through it.

The Faculty and Acting Dean of a graduate professional school associated with a large and prestigious east coast university sought consultation because it was in effect paralyzed in the aftermath of the resignation of its highly successful Dean. I say "highly successful" because, indeed, the record of achievements he left behind was truly impressive. During his tenure he had significantly increased the school's endowment, including the establishment of several chairs that allowed for the recruiting of nationally prominent scholars. He had instituted a number of exciting new programs and linked the academic resources of the school with pressing needs of the local community, instilling a new sense of purpose and vitality in the school. In the process he was able to link a number of important local institutions to the school, providing more local support and backing than the school had ever enjoyed previously. Finally, as a result of these and other advances, the national standing of the school was dramatically improved. Indeed, the school turned the corner, eliminating the risk it had faced in the past of being disbanded by the university's administration whose support had always been shaky.

But now the faculty was paralyzed. Several national searches for senior faculty positions had ended in failure and acrimony. Faculty in-fighting made it impossible for some courses to be approved. Confidential faculty discussions were leaked to the student newspaper, prompting bitter public accusations and counter accusations.

Most of this erupted after the Dean left to take a position elsewhere. Everyone agreed on the Dean's record of achievement -- and yet it couldn't be denied that in some way too the paralysis and bitterness was also a legacy of his leadership. If leadership is a function of the group, clearly this group now found itself unable to assume this function in his absence. What had happened to bring this about?

The former Dean more than willingly agreed to be interviewed by us, and I enjoyed the experience of interacting with such an intelligent and involved man who was himself eager to try to understand what he had done to contribute to bringing about this distressing state of affairs. Indeed, I shared the experience that had been described to us by a number of members of the faculty and administrative staff of being stimulated and encouraged by him. What more could one ask for from a leader: a smart, committed, engaged, open person who stimulated the best in others?

But there is more to the story. Two things gradually began to emerge as we reviewed the data of the interviews and pieced together the history of the school over the past several years. One was that the Dean, by his own admission, loved to concentrate on the new projects that represented for him the future of the school, and he focused his attention on those bright and energetic members of the faculty and staff who came up with new initiatives and projects. Those he encouraged and supported. The others, he left alone.

Or so it seemed. Actually, as we probed more, it came to seem that he actually avoided confrontations with the more conservative, traditional faculty members or those whom he came to view as unproductive or uncommitted. One example of this: a faculty search committee was established to find a senior person to fill an endowed chair. He realized early on that the committee, in his view, was not paying sufficient attention to affirmative action guidelines the school had established -- but he put off speaking his mind until the committee had almost completed its work. At the point that the committee was about to submit its short list containing the name of not one woman or one minority member, he felt he had no choice but to suspend the committee, an action that deeply wounded the committee chair and angered the other members who had invested considerable energy and time in its efforts.

Another example: he had repeatedly passed over requests for promotion from some faculty members who he felt were unproductive, but he did not speak with them about it. In reviewing these incidents with him one could sense his strong aversion to people he felt were self-indulgent and lazy, qualities quite the opposite from those he sought out and rewarded in others. Perhaps he feared expressing his contempt had he talked with them more openly; but it does seem as if they picked up his contempt for them none the less. And, of course, they were among those who "leaked" inside information to the newspaper and spread rumors of the school's internal troubles, after he left, undoing some of the efforts the former Dean had made to bolster the reputation of the school in the university as well as the local community.

The effect of these preferences of his over the years was that he helped to exacerbate divisions among the faculty. In effect, he chose -- though I don't think it was at all a conscious choice -- to lead part of the faculty, not the whole. The part he neglected and into which he projected and perhaps allowed others to project feelings of incompetence, lack of commitment and backwardness, found its opportunity to retaliate and vent its envy and rage upon his departure.

But there was another dynamic factor that contributed to this backlash. In fact I think that if it had just been a matter of this splitting of the faculty, the school might well have found the means to surmount these divisive forces; those the Dean disparaged were generally disparaged by others as well. The second issue was, I believe, the unconscious dependency the Dean had fostered during the period of his energetic and highly successful leadership. Forging powerful alliances with outsiders as well as the administration which vigorously backed his efforts to transform the school, bringing in new money, he became something of a "savior." Many people paired with him in initiating new projects. I think it is fair to say that many people loved him -- just as others came to hate him. So when he left, it was as if the school was bereft: it lost a person that most people in the school felt, unconsciously, they could not do without.

Now, these were smart people, smart enough to know that they could survive. What I'm saying is that along side these rational thoughts were powerful irrational thoughts and feelings that undermined their ability to adapt to change. Moreover, these irrational thoughts were tied in with the group experience, because with all the revitalization and transformation that had occurred under the Dean's leadership, I believe a new sense of group identity had failed to coalesce. The new institution that had come into existence under his leadership was based less on new sets of relationships among the faculty than on relationships with him. That is, not only was the faculty split among themselves, those who had worked so hard to bring about change had done so by linking with him. When he left, then, it was as if the linchpin was removed, and no other structures of group relationship had come into existence to support the institution in his absence.

It may seem as if this analysis of the situation puts the blame on him for having failed to attend to this matter of group cohesion and group identity. Certainly, he played a significant part. But it would be a mistake to leave it there. It follows from the idea of leadership as a function of the group, that this outcome was brought about by the group as a whole.

In this respect, it would be useful to look closer at the nature of the institution -- and the group -- in which this occurred. Academic institutions are particularly vulnerable to this kind of disarray and acrimony because there is so little incentive to individuals to pull together collectively. Tenure -- which is permanent job security -- and the tradition of academic freedom promote the notion the each classroom is a separate fiefdom under the control of the individual professor. At the same time, the enormous divide between the work of administration, on

the one hand, and the work of teaching, on the other, promotes a kind of institutional helplessness on the part of instructors -- if not, at the other extreme, a machiavellian or sociopathic competence. Instructors themselves in such a setting resist the notion of collective responsibility. They tend to assume automatically that the administration is up to no good, has sold out, lacks serious scholarly purpose, and so forth. In this school there is considerable evidence that this was in fact the situation inherited by the Dean, a state of affairs fostered by the previous administration, rendering the faculty as a result even less able to experience itself -- much less think of itself -- as an entity, as a whole.

We have to face the possibility that in this situation there may not have been a way to bring the faculty together. It may not have been within the power of any one person to do so. In other words, it may be that in such institutions major change can be brought about only through dividing the faculty, in effect, and forming individual alliances. But if that is the case - - and I am by no means convinced it is -- at the very least we need to understand what that does to the fabric of institutional relatedness and prepared for the consequences. Certainly, now, the fabric has to be knit together.

Not all problems can be solved. But at least they can be faced and understood -- and this is what brings me back to a point I raised at the beginning about all those books in the book store on management and my association to the equally vast literature on self-help: Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Ten Steps to Empowerment, etc. Books on leadership or management -- if they are not about becoming narcissistically aloof and invulnerable -- are about developing the self through the life cycle. They strike me as being about growing up and accepting responsibility for oneself and others.

I think this is a very important point. To take on the job -- and not to try to hide within it -- means to accept being grown up. I don't mean that to sound like anything less than the very tall order it is -- but I think that is, in fact, what it is. Much of the literature on leadership has converged with the literature on becoming a person. The best recent example of this is the work of Covey: there is no distinction between the leader and "the highly effective person."

In one way this strikes me as a positive development. This stresses that becoming effective and responsible is a task faced by everyone, not just formal leaders. On the other hand, what needs to be added is the idea that we can help ourselves only up to a point. We are in this together. In helping ourselves, we have to help others -- as they need to help us in

helping themselves. The leadership we need is the leadership we have to create together.

The most entrenched myth we have in our culture -- more entrenched even than that of the heroic leader -- is the myth of the individual person, whether or not he or she is "highly effective." It's an up-hill battle to remind ourselves -- day after day, task after task -- that we are members of groups, and that we derive our meaning and our effectiveness from those groups.