

Leadership

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Leadership is a topic that's talked about extensively in business today.

For some, leadership has an ethereal, mystical quality that cannot be understood and that you must be born with. For others, leadership is a specific set of behaviours and skills that can be taught at business school. Some years ago, a MBA qualification would be a key to boardroom doors whilst today you'll be lucky if it opens a broom cupboard.

There is absolutely no doubt that the nature of business has changed, whilst another point of view is that all the key principles are as important today as they have ever been.

The most important of these is effective leadership.

Words like 'driver', 'pilot' or 'pathfinder' are often used to describe the leader's role, yet for many entrepreneurs and corporate executives, the position can be a lonely one. Being a leader means having the courage of your convictions, the faith in your journey to go it alone. Only when you stop and look behind do you find that there were people following you. In this context, a leader's role is more like a lighthouse.

To say that a leader leads people seems obvious, yet it is important to note that it is the people who choose to follow, not the leader who makes them.

An excellent leader has a wide range of specific tools in his or her toolkit. They include group influence, mediation, goal setting and, above all, the ability to inspire other people to take action – to contribute to the broader goals.

In this context, we are exploring those tools that create the behaviour of leaders – the behaviour that casual observers mistake for intangible leadership qualities.

Our first task is therefore to define leadership, so that we have a common frame of reference for the concepts and tools that we will explore.

How do we define a leader? And how does a leader differ from a manager, an entrepreneur, a mentor or a visionary?

One way to define a leader is through the people that he or she leads. It seems that having followers is not a prerequisite of the skills of a leader, but is more a means of identifying the traits which distinguish a leader from something like a visionary or entrepreneur.

Certainly, we can see examples every day where leaders introduced to an organisation to revolutionise it are thought of very differently when people no longer want change.

A business leader, known for his previous work as a 'hatchet man' might be brought in to 'prune out the dead wood', for which he is praised and rewarded. What happens when he carries on pruning?

Another business leader, brought in to smooth out a period of transition and change, might be very good at stopping the organisation from changing and providing stability. When the

organisation needs to change, she is seen as living in the past, holding the business back and forcing it to stagnate.

So, the success of a leader is very much dependent on other people's perceptions of their actions, given the business context in which they operate. The ability to innovate, stabilise or inspire could be perceived as either good or bad, given the context, therefore we could say that these kinds of abilities must be secondary to what lies at the core of leadership.

How could some of a leader's abilities be perceived negatively?

Positive perception

Inspiring
Innovative
Good at making tough decisions
Strong
Leads by example
Democratic

Negative perception

Manipulative
Obsessed with change
Ruthless
Autocratic
Controlling
Weak

So, what might we define as the core qualities of a leader that transcend the context?

We could suggest that, for our purposes, leaders have:

- The ability to conceive the future and translate it into a roadmap for others to follow
- The ability to stick to a course of action regardless of what other people say or do
- A high degree of self belief and self reliance
- The ability to engage the skills of others and build a team that can deliver their vision
- The ability to communicate in an engaging way to a wide range of people
- The ability to focus on what is important
- The ability to identify and gather feedback about their progress
- The ability to engage the resources available to solve problems
- An acceptance of the rewards and risks of their position
- The ability to plan rather than trust to fate
- Personal ownership of their actions, successes and failures
- The ability to recognise when something has failed and the ability to do something else instead
- A strong sense of congruence, honesty or ethics

So, successful leaders will set a course of action and follow it, accepting that sometimes people will love them and sometimes hate them. They are able to engage all resources in any context to move forwards and they take personal responsibility for their actions.

If a plan fails, it's no-one else's fault but their own.

Notice that, while a leader may have strong ethics, not everyone will agree with them. Could this be what defines the people who choose to follow that leader?

Many of these qualities could equally apply to an entrepreneur, the difference being that an entrepreneur is often focussed on achieving the outcome himself, using his own skills, whilst the successful leader is focussed on achieving the outcome by engaging the resources and skills of other people.

Even when the leader seems to be struggling against the tide, he or she will still have the support of some followers, so a further key skill is the ability to identify those people are and to develop relationships with them that stand the test of time. You'll often find that a good leader has a good "right-hand man" – or even a whole crowd of them.

Many people talk about "leadership" when they really mean "management" and there is a simple distinction that we can use. In a changing environment, a manager will work to understand the individuals in his or her team, adapting to their needs and helping them to cope with change. Like a shepherd, the manager's goal is to get the team to achieve the objective. A leader is more interested in the goal itself and providing a vision of that goal that is inspiring. A leader requires followers to commit to the cause, to choose to follow and to work out for themselves what makes that goal worth achieving.

Already, you can see that leadership is not the answer to all of an organisation's needs. Particularly strong and visionary leaders can create inspiration and energy but can leave people asking "But how?"

When I hear HR managers saying that they want to develop their managers into leaders, I am always concerned about this. A flock of sheep can't follow more than one shepherd. High quality management skills are to be applauded as they are vital for maintaining the coherence and integrity of the organisation. If the leader is the yacht's sail, the manager is the rudder.

Our working population is coming of an age where we don't need to be told what to do, every minute of the day. We don't need supervision – we need leadership to lift us up and good management to stop us falling. We are transforming from sheep into cats, and you already know how to herd cats – you open a tin of cat food and wait.



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