About this Issue

Leading Today and into the Future

by
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Guest Editor

Recently, a client who is transitioning into the CEO position of a large organization and selecting his team asked me, "What key characteristics are needed by leaders today and those leading into the future?" I explained that to put my response into context, there are three trends that should be understood.

First, it is becoming increasingly clear that management and leadership roles are distinctly different. A leader is more concerned with change, and therefore focuses attention on a compelling vision of the future—one that also addresses the needs and values of constituents. Leaders rely primarily on their personal ability to influence others to shift or transform their thinking and, in the process of doing so, gain support for their visions.

A manager, on the other hand, focuses on maintaining the status quo of organizations by clarifying functions, roles and tasks—in essence, managing the complexity often created by the leader. Managers work within the existing organizational culture, norms and beliefs, and relate to subordinates primarily by an exchange or a transaction. Managers rely more heavily on their position power to influence others rather than on their personal power.

Both management and leadership are needed for organizations to survive today. Historically though, the emphasis has been on management skills.

In *Leadership and Empowerment*, Warner Burke highlights the fundamental differences between leaders and managers yet stresses their interdependence. Additionally, he provides insight into the different ways in which each empowers others. His conceptualization of leadership, parts of which were written a decade ago, is as relevant today. In a current reflection, Burke makes a strong argument for the greater need for leadership today—leaders who can empower people with a promising vision.

Secondly, in these times of uncertainty and massive technological, social and economic change, there is an increasing need for leadership, not only at the top of an organization, but in more varied contexts. Leaders are needed at all levels and in all places—both inside and outside of organizations. Real leaders bring out the leadership abilities in others. These days, we need to foster the leadership potential in all people. In their article, Kouzes and Posner agree that "leadership is everyone's business." Furthermore, we can all become leaders in different circumstances and in various areas using our diverse passions and skills.

Finally, the relationship between leaders and followers is changing. In the past we looked to leaders to have the answers in much the same way

children look to parents. Now, because of such rapid change, no one has all the answers. Without the traditional safety nets of lifetime employment and long-term organizational stability, we are all being challenged to "grow up." To work collaboratively in "mature" relationships with our leaders requires much more dialogue, mutual trust and empowerment.

Especially in flattened organizational structures, one of the vital roles of a leader is to help create an environment that empowers individuals to take responsibility for their own performance while supporting the organization's vision. At the same time, leaders need the support of followers. In *The Other Side of Leadership*, Stanley Herman writes, "Leadership and 'followership' are equally essential functions, but like two sides of a coin they are distinct and each must serve the other *relevantly* to bring forth intended results." Therefore, leadership needs to be considered not only in the context of the situation but in the relationship between the leader and constituents.

Having set the context for leadership, I then shared with my CEO client some of the characteristics and skills important for leaders. Subsequently, I have asked some of the leaders in our field to share their perspectives.

In determining the key characteristics of an effective leader, the first came with little thought.

Effective leaders have the ability to create compelling visions that respond to the needs and values of constituents.

This skill requires the ability to gather data, understand the impact of the internal and external environment and, most importantly, to see the big picture. With a strong vision, leaders provide direction and inspiration. Leaders respond to constituents' needs for meaning and direction—to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Working toward a vision they believe in, constituents are willing to put in their time and effort, experiencing renewal and meaning in the process.

According to Kouzes and Posner "the capacity to paint an uplifting and ennobling picture of the future is what differentiates leaders from other credible sources."

Effective leaders have the ability to create a supportive environment for others, especially in times of uncertainty, when people are being asked to take greater risks and make changes.

By communicating openly and supporting learning, leaders invite individuals to draw on their own resources. Leaders foster a climate where people begin to understand that the greatest source of stability will be trust in themselves and the process of learning and changing.

Edgar Schein explores the notion of psychological safety in his article. He explains that leaders need to use their power to make individuals feel psychologically safe instead of threatened. Too often, leaders threaten or disconfirm followers to incite anxiety of survival as a means of motivating.

It is important for leaders to understand the dynamics of survival and learning anxiety. As Schein describes, survival anxiety is brought on by the increasing unpredictability and lack of stability in environments which are experiencing downsizing, reengineering, restructuring, and a myriad of new initiatives. This lack of certainty requires people to learn new behaviors and means of coping and surviving. The task of learning, however, has its own inherent challenges. None of us likes to be out of control. According to Schein, the learning that is necessary for organizations to transform themselves involves balancing learning anxiety with survival anxiety.

Effective leaders have the ability to learn and to inspire others to engage in new ideas–stepping out of current paradigms.

Because the world is continually in a state of flux, leaders must be avid learners. In times when the rules are constantly changing, leaders need to identify and question operating assumptions and to be open to learning new things. They need to encourage followers to do the same.

Schein effectively builds the case for creating a climate of learning, and expounds on eight processes to support learning. He also reviews some of the cultural inhibitors which provide challenges for organizational learning and change.

Charles Kiefer, in *Leadership and the Learning Organization*, argues that leaders must create the systems and structures to promote an ongoing conversation that "raises the organization's collective intelligence, commitment, and creativity." It is the job of the leader to help constituents distinguish between observable facts and interpretations.

Kouzes and Posner, as well as Burke, contend that, through dialogue, leaders are able to build an esprit de corps, a community of shared values where diverse constituent needs and aspirations can be fulfilled.

Effective leaders are committed to empowering others.

Through empowerment, leaders tap the motivational energy of constituents. By conveying high expectations, leaders enhance constituents' conviction in their self-efficacy. Leaders trust the process, believing that followers can resolve issues and have skills and resources beyond what followers may believe. Leaders also try not to maintain rigid control or power, promoting the development of others.

Ed Oakley, in his article, purports that enlightened leaders help others to develop their natural leadership abilities. They are dedicated to empowering and bringing out the best in others. Strong leaders understand the value in sharing the leadership role, and are willing to allow others to use their skills to bring a group closer to achieving its goals. According to Oakley, whether it be climbing mountains or attaining peak performance in an organization, "leaders emerge naturally as specific situations call upon their inherent skills and attitudes, as long as there is encouragement and freedom to do so."

Kouzes and Posner found that, "exemplary leaders make other people feel strong. They enable others to take ownership and responsibility for their group's success." It is when constituents are empowered and feel strong that they are capable of extraordinary things. Leaders know that when followers feel like they have choice and therefore control over their own lives, they have the energy to mobilize commitment and the resources to achieve a vision.

Effective leaders are believable. They have credibility and influence through personal example and commitment.

Rather than by using their positional power, leaders motivate others by their personal convictions, beliefs and presence.

Kouzes and Posner's review of lessons they have learned in their years of research, point to credibility as the foundation of leadership. In this time of greater alienation, cynicism and lack of loyalty, constituents, more than anything, want to be able to trust leaders, know that they are personally excited about their visions and have the necessary competence to lead.

Credible leaders are personally committed to a vision; they "walk their talk" and their actions demonstrate commitment and persistence. Credible leaders are consistent. They know their values, what they stand for and where they are going. Kouzes and Posner suggest that OD practitioners use a "credit-check" to begin every intervention with a leader.

According to Kiefer, what makes great leaders "is not what they do nearly as much as who they are." In the book reviewed by John Careatti, *In Search of Good Form: Gestalt Therapy for Couples and Families*, Joseph Zinker emphasizes the importance of personal presence and authenticity, rather than techniques. Leadership is an art form. It is the presence and personal credibility of the leader that influences constituents.

Effective leaders have the ability to be strong and powerful communicators.

Both interpersonally and with groups, leaders communicate effectively. They understand the importance of using many methods of communication including symbols, stories and repetition to reach constituents.

Leaders do not always have professional, perfectly polished speaking skills, but they are convincing in their communication. They are able to engage people in dialogue, understand various needs and lift hopes and spirits around a shared vision. Leaders also communicate through their actions; their actions often being more important than words.

Effective leaders have the ability to take action and manage risks.

Leaders make personal sacrifices to achieve a shared vision. Often their behavior conveys a strong message about their personal commitment and trustworthiness. They don't ask followers to do what they would not personally do. In fact, they often do much more toward achieving a vision than they ask of others. The actions of leaders motivate and inspire others. According to Kouzes and Posner, "Leading by example is how leaders make visions and values tangible." Kiefer believes that "leadership happens when someone takes a stand in favor of a desired future that other people desire, either actively or latently."

Effective leaders are self-aware and encourage self-reflection.

Leaders know what is important to them and what they want to achieve. They strive to evolve as individuals and stand strong in their beliefs. They are committed to using their talents and resources in pursuit of a vision. At the same time, leaders support constituents in finding meaning and encourage their autonomy, development and sense of connection.

Today, where the workplace is often a primary source of community and many are experiencing a need for greater connection and contribution, some are beginning to question how spirituality fits in. Jay Conger, in *Moved by the Spirit*, explores the interest in workplace spirituality and the potential benefits and barriers. Conger writes, "We are coming to recognize that perhaps a new state of mind– and a new state of heart–are what is really needed to foster human development and community spirit in our workplaces." Using examples from successful executives who have incorporated spirituality in their leadership, Conger explains that "What these leaders do is to tap into our personal search for meaning." In order to do this, leaders need to be self-aware and promote self-reflection among constituents.

Effective leaders have a strong understanding of the change process, especially the human side of change.

People naturally resist change that is forced upon them. In contrast, people are more open to change that they can understand, influence and support.

Leaders provide people with opportunities to deal with their resistance and objections to change. Just as employees are asked to "go with" change rather than "against" it, leaders listen to the nature of the resistance, welcoming the opportunity to respond to their concerns and thus develop deep commitment from others. Working from this perspective, more effective and efficient change is possible.

Effective leaders are able to embrace differences and model this kind of thinking for others.

Leaders understand and value diversity. By diversity, I mean everything that makes us different. Leaders have the ability to deal with ambiguity and conflict. They demonstrate respect for differences, while highlighting the commonalities among all of us. They understand that organizations that value and support diversity are positioned to attract and retain the best talent. In pursuit of a vision, in which creating new ideas and innovations are essential, diversity can be an asset. Leaders understand that environments that enable individuals to embrace diversity will provide the best opportunity to achieve individual and organizational potential. Leaders also know that creating such an environment is a process requiring effective communication and systems that support cultural change. They also believe that this work is worth the effort.

Effective leaders recognize and celebrate achievements toward a vision.

Leaders provide reinforcement to constituents and thank people for their contributions. Leaders personally recognize commitment and reinforce it. They do this through personal interactions, as well as through organizational systems and group celebrations. And the recognition received motivates and reinforces people's commitment to achieving the vision. Without alignment of organizational systems, desired change efforts cannot be sustained.

It is my hope that after reading this issue, both you and my client will have a stronger, perhaps revised, definition of leadership, as well as some good ideas about how to support and foster it. I think you will find the views of the distinguished experts on these pages to be provocative and useful. I believe that it is our

role as OD professionals to be leaders ourselves, and to foster leadership among our clients. This is the most exciting, challenging and rewarding part of our work.   ■

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