

The Other Side of Leadership

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The 1990's have been and promise to be a decade of management turmoil. Downsizing, restructuring and reengineering have trimmed significantly the ranks of middle managers, and left many of those remaining nervous, confused, overworked and spread thin. At the same time, survivors are forced to cope with continually changing definitions of what they are supposed to do. In response to this gale of change, managers at all levels are told that they have to become leaders or, at least, to incorporate a higher proportion of "leadership" into their jobs. If they don't, they're warned, they and their organizations will be swamped and left to sink. What is curious though, is that all of the examination and exhortation (never mind the training dollars) are directed to helping leaders to be more responsive to the needs of followers (some may prefer "constituents"), and almost none to helping followers to be more responsive to the needs of leaders.

The "Good Model" of Leadership

According to a consensus of authoritative reports on what followers want and need from leadership, there are three core elements. Think of them as: Stimulation, Implementation and Character. Each will be discussed below:

Stimulation. The function of the leader is to create a vision, and enlisting followers by translating that vision into their interests. He or she communicates

that vision in a way that inspires their emotions, energy and motivation. The leader helps them see it, feel it and devote extra energy to it.

Implementation. The leader uses his/her skill and energy to "make the vision happen." He/she does this through intense focus on a limited number of specific targets, providing priorities, performance standards and oversight for the organization.

Character. The leader's character, all the way from exuding charisma to establishing credibility is considered crucial. Without stature, the leader is perceived as impotent, even when his/her vision is favored, and without character, he/she is deemed untrustworthy. The credible leader must also be competitively adroit, and have the capacity to withstand adversity and come back from failures. "Credibility" here has a two-part meaning. First, it means honesty and straight-forwardness. The leader is consistent, persistent, predictable and reliable; thus, he/she inspires trust. Second, and even more important, the leader has the capacity to bring forth what he promises (even when the means by which he will do it may not always be clear).

But What Do Leaders Want?

In my interviews with nearly 100 leaders of business, turnabout seemed fair play so I asked them what they wanted of their followers (as well as what they did not want). Under the same rubric of: Stimulation, Implementation and Character, what these leaders wanted of their followers was somewhat distinct. Their versions went something like this:

Stimulation. From ancient conquerors like Alexander the Great, through grand monarches like Catherine the Great, to contemporary politicians like recent U.S. presidents, leaders are dependent on followers for support. Trust in the leader confirms his/her leadership, bulwarks him/her in tough times and inspires him/her to give 110% effort. For the leader, loyalty is a primordial basic. Leaders also value supporters who are in tune with them and the mission, but rather than "yes-men," they prize those who see specific opportunities and problems that the leader doesn't see. One CEO's summary of ideal followers was, "When you work with them, you understand each other quickly and are in tune, You know they are going to do it right and on schedule."

Implementation. Leaders, most basically, want followers who produce targeted outputs. As one said, "They deliver, deliver, deliver." Leaders want flexibility and adaptability (when it is consistent with a designated objective and framework). Leaders, in these pressure filled times, also appreciate those who lighten their loads and can handle problems without need for higher intervention. Leaders appreciate followers who "have a feel" for the best times and techniques for arguing with them, and especially those who, "whether they have convinced me or not, at my 'end-of-argument signal,' are ready to go ahead full speed."

Character. Leaders prize self-confidence in followers, and their willingness to accept responsibility and be accountable. As one said, "There are those who naturally take responsibility for meeting commitments. They are self-confident, yet they know their limits. They keep growing." Leaders also value people who are honest and independent in thought, especially when they understand the "politics" of the situation. For example, "They understand who will influence the decision and make sure their inputs are prominently considered."

Leadership—A Reciprocal Contract

In conclusion, leadership and followership are equally essential functions, but like the two sides of a coin they are distinct and each must serve the other

relevantly, to bring forth intended results. If a leader's responsibility is to "translate his/her vision into the interests of others," he/she needs to become aware of what those other interests are. A reciprocal understanding is required for the follower. The clearer each party is about what the other wants (including their 'intangible' wants), the better.

Organizations need a process that encourages leaders and their followers at all levels to develop clear, mutual agreements—"contracts," if you like—on compatible sets of aims and operating principles, based on what they want of each other. This process might be an effective substitute for many reportedly ineffective performance appraisal systems now in use. These working-relationship agreements should be developed between leaders and followers on an individual basis, not automatically assumed, nor generalized according to the prescriptions of the latest organizational fad. Followers, as well as leaders (at all levels), need to be educated (preferably jointly) to recognize and respond to each other's wants, paying particular attention to: (1) how to be a better sounding board; (2) learning how your output is used by others; (3) learning how to identify leader/follower needs, including pressures on each other and how to help lighten the load; and (4) understanding the politics of issues.

A strong current of democracy runs through our culture, not only at the national level, but increasingly in our public and industrial organizations. In our dialogues about leadership, there is an ever increasing advocacy for distributing power broadly. When members of a free society insist on their rights to influence policy and determine practice, unless they are also willing and able to take responsibility and assume accountability for doing their part, we may devolve into a society of underdogs and casualties, crying "don't blame me" and pointing upward.

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