

## Breaking News - You Are The Leader!

### Leadership At All Levels

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Breaking News - If you are a manager today - in a thriving, competitive, progressive organization - in all likelihood, your role has evolved into something far more demanding and much further-reaching than your title suggests.

Nearly a decade ago, I came to the realization that the role of the leader and the role of the manager had merged, and no one seemed to notice or bothered to inform us. During the initiation and evolution of this astonishing amalgamation, the widely acknowledged and published experts were insularly preoccupied. They were adamantly defining and defending the ever-fading distinction between leadership and management. Their rhetoric, and the climate it created, was exceptionally partisan, and woe unto the "idiot" who couldn't grasp the dissimilarities.

Unfortunately, what the experts failed to anticipate was the impact of large scaled reorganization and the de-layering of the corporate hierarchy. One significant and echoing impact of razing the corporate castle has been the precipitous fall of leadership responsibilities from the lofty ranks of the executive's suite to the mezzanine ranks of the manager's cubicle, and even to the lobby level of the supervisor's workstation.

As expert credentials competed and collided, and P.R. campaigns were launched to announce the latest in the rehashing of the antiquated myths about leadership, it was very clear that there were some major disconnects between the textbook and the truth. What was even clearer, even painfully clear, to the people contending and attempting to master this nebulous reality, was that the experts were espousing a theory whose practicality was speedily waning. Either side's vehemently defended position was becoming a "contemporary antique".

The expectation for the manager, in the new structure, calls for a level of agility that has never before been experienced. Naturally, those working under new expectations will experience new challenges. "Lean and mean" may resonate and reverberate as a motto, granted. But when adopted as an operating strategy, lean and mean necessitates an additional competency. A competency that in large part was limited or completely missing. The missing competency was widespread leadership awareness and skills.

Practical illustrations of the downshifting of leadership responsibility and the quest for a deeper penetration of leadership skills are everywhere. While working with a group of line workers in a confections manufacturing plant, I had the opportunity to see just how deeply the "Leadership Expectation" had actually permeated the organizational hierarchy. In the old system these workers were in no way considered leaders. If asked, they would tell you that the "old guard," more than likely, regarded them as a liability instead of leadership material.

The line worker's roles, coupled with their level, undoubtedly precluded them from being thought of as "middle management." If pressed, the organization may have counted them, at best, as pseudo-supervisors. Again, pursuant to the paradigm of the past, to provide "leadership" education and training to personnel at the line level was inconceivable, even thought to be irresponsible. That is not today's organizational reality! Leadership education and training is the expectation of the highly talented and ambitious employee and is becoming the prerequisite to becoming an employer of choice. For companies competing in today's demanding global marketplace, leadership education and training is becoming the benchmark of a leadership culture.

During the workshop, which focuses on developing leadership skills at all levels, the participants are afforded the opportunity to learn via challenge and contrast. One of the exercises requires the group to differentiate the behaviors and responsibilities of a "leader" from those of a "manager". The exercise stimulates some very lively discussion, and results in a reshaping of definitions. After a spirited debate, the participants believe they have completed the exercise - hardly. This is where the real learning begins. The next activity, using the same list of behaviors and responsibilities, is to have them assess the list to determine which of the behaviors and responsibilities are expected of them in their current roles. The results are very telling and indisputably support the reality of the manager-leader.

The early organizational and interpersonal consequences of this expanded expectation of managers has left many confused and frustrated. The confusion manifests in inefficiencies and the frustration leads to deteriorating work relationships. The pervasiveness of the confusion seems to know no boundaries. One would think title and position would give some a hint, but that is not always the case.

Recently while conducting a series of workshops for an international firm in the UK, the breadth of confusion and frustration, independent of level, was confirmed. The audience was indeed an impressive gathering of the firm's movers and shakers, along with many up and coming stars. In this audience of professionals were persons charged with a wide range of significant responsibility, such as country presidents, heads of operations, regional directors, and district managers. As a common ice breaker, I asked the group to indicate by a show of hands, how many of them saw themselves as managers? Of course, an overwhelming majority of the hands go up, and go up very confidently I might add. I surveyed the room quickly, pretending to make note of the results. Then, immediately, while the hands were still raised, I asked how many saw themselves as leaders? Instantaneously the hands began to fall. Some fell quickly as if to say, "Oh no, not me. I could never be a leader." Some fell more slowly as if to suggest, "They tell me I'm a leader, but I'm not sure." And some seem caught in a suspended animation, as if to say, "I really don't know the difference, and I am afraid to make the wrong choice right now in front of my peers."

If this same type of confusion and ambiguity exists in your organization, what are the business implications regarding the future of your competitive advantage, the transference of knowledge capital, and the necessary dexterity to take advantage of shifting marketplace conditions with "right now" decision making?

Perhaps you are plagued by a burning question, as was I: How is it possible for individuals not to understand that they are leaders? Individuals who have jumbo-budgets, mega-responsibilities for people and process, and are charged with influencing and impacting their corporate culture (as all of them were), how could they not know? How can an organization function efficiently, effectively and profitably – long term – if the leaders don't know **they are the leaders**? What kind of employee development and succession planning would flow from an environment where most the leaders believe someone else is responsible for crafting, managing and actualizing the vision and mission? I firmly subscribe to the notion of leaders without titles, but I can't fathom leaders without awareness, attention and a success agenda.

Several things must happen to lift and clear this miasma of misunderstanding:

**Acknowledge And Embrace The Change** - There is little benefit in bemoaning the changes. It will speed the organization's cultural transformation to openly, and often, acknowledge the current reality and issue a call to action. Stress the opportunities inherent to the change and not give the obstacles undo prominence. Whether you rely on classic metaphors such as: Who Moved My Cheese, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, or What's Your 86?, the message must strongly promote and advocate proactivity, persistence, and progress.

**Cultivate A Corporate Culture Of Empowerment** – While some believe the era of empowerment has passed; in reality, empowerment is integral to facilitating the demonstration of leadership at all levels. It is impossible to cultivate a culture of leadership in absence of an environment of empowerment. If the manager-leader is constantly weighing the decision to act against the threat of castigation, indecision (at best) and groupthink (at worst) is all that can be accomplished.

Granting individuals clear understanding of the new expectations, along with clear definitions of roles and limits of authority are the minimal requirements for empowerment. In strange, even a counter-intuitive way, knowing the limits of the role will allow leaders to fully expand to the limits and capacity of the role. It is much easier to boldly approach the edge when you know exactly where the edge is.

**Provide The Necessary Education And Training** – To introduce new expectations, while neglecting to provide the necessary education and training, is a sure way to alienate your workforce and doom the transformation of your corporate culture. Don't assume that because the term leadership is used so widely, that your associates understand it in a practical sense, nor that they are able (willing) to consistently incorporate the new behaviors. At the minimum, a general understanding of the basic philosophy, principles, and practices of leadership (in its new configuration) is required.

Until the old understanding of how a manager contributes to the success of the organization is replaced with the new paradigm, the results will be inconsistent and unpredictable. The alignment of the manager's head to appreciate the "why to" (that is the education part) and the habituation of the manager's hand to master the "how to" (that's the training part) positions the manager-leader to not merely survive in the new structure, but to also have an immediate impact in her or his sphere of influence.

**Integration Into Performance Management System** - It has proven to be true, that what gets measured gets done and what gets rewarded gets repeated. To leverage the wisdom of this observation, you must integrate the new expectations into the performance management system. To introduce the unfamiliar concept of leadership into the very familiar discussion around how one is compensated, will send a clear message that this is more than a flavor of the month.

**Get The Employees Involved At The Grassroots Level** – Consider having an employee nominated award within the team or department to recognize individuals who demonstrate the new behaviors. The award or prize should be something that is coveted by the team, i.e. ½ day off, dinner for two at a notable local restaurant, or a scholarship to cover the cost of CEU requirements. The ROI on this strategy is multifold. In essence you are rewarding one person as the entire group makes the shift in its level of leadership consciousness and practices. As they model the behaviors and watch for others doing the same, the culture is systemically shifted.

If you are a manager today, in a thriving, competitive, progressive organization, here's the breaking news, you are also a leader.

Adopting this new paradigm will help to combat the stutter stepping and stumbling that prevents many organization, associations and firms from operating with the cat-like responsiveness required to be competitive - to say nothing of being a market sector leader.

As the concept of the manager leader is embraced and managers are equipped to more fully execute on the new expectation, a win-win-win outcome can be achieved for the organization, the manager and the key stakeholders.

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