

Thoughts on Leadership



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Ever since there first were two functioning humans on the face of the earth and one of them had an idea about what the two of them should do next, leadership has been an important part of the human equation.

In the millennia since that first attempt at leadership, there have been an untold number of ideas about leadership discussed, argued and, in the last few centuries, published. As the treasury of human knowledge has grown, ideas both exotic and routine have been introduced and debated. Is it possible to still have a truly original idea about leadership?

Yes – even if a particular idea evokes the reaction of “Well, that’s just common sense” or “I remember thinking that once.” An assertion does not, however, become part of the continuing evolution of thought until it is articulated, explained and pushed out there – which is the intent of this article. With luck, the ideas expressed below will become part of various discussions and may even be the catalysts for still more original thoughts on leadership.

Definition

Let us begin this short discussion with a definition, one we introduced in our book, *Five-Star Leadership* (Wiley, 1997): *Leadership is the creation of an environment in which others can self-actualize in the process of completing the job.*

The majority of definitions of leadership made public prior to our book – and since – concentrate, usually solely, on the idea of one person getting others to do what the one person had in mind all along. In short, the focus has been on “completing the job.” But humans are more complex than that – and leadership should have, as one of its goals, the possibility of being successful more than once. To do that requires paying attention to more than just getting the here-and-now, measurable task accomplished.

Humans are both rational (“completing the job”) and emotional (“can self-actualize”). Any leader who wants the current success to increase the odds of future success must reach out to his or her followers on both levels. In fact, any definition of leadership that does not specifically address both of these components of human nature can be discarded for having only short-term impact potential.

The emotional portion is the more difficult. For one thing, it has become recognized that no one actually motivates anyone else; each individual motivates himself or herself. This motivation –

necessary if a person is to self-actualize and extremely helpful if he or she is to complete the job in a satisfactory manner – is far more likely to take place if the person's would-be leader creates the needed environment.

Leadership Priorities

The first two priorities of leadership are generally well-known and accepted, with most discussion centering on their comparative importance: (1) Accomplish the mission and (2) Take care of your people. It is the third priority (which we also introduced in ***Five-Star Leadership***) that is original in the sense of the importance assigned to it and its position – third – relative to the other priorities: Create more leaders. This can be called the “legacy priority” for success in handling this priority goes a long way toward determining how a would-be leader will be remembered in the years, or perhaps centuries, after he or she has left the particular position.

The sequencing of the priorities is intentional. In a crisis-free setting, the effective leader pursues all three priorities. If a crisis develops, it may be necessary, for a finite period of time, to suspend the pursuit of the third or, perhaps even the second and third. Assuming the leader has been diligent about looking to all three previously, the followers will understand, on an instinctive level if no other, the narrowing of the leader's focus – secure in their knowledge that, with the return of “normal” times, the leader will once again give attention to all three priorities.

In brief, a leader pursues the first priority – Accomplish the mission – to get through “today.” Success with the second priority – Take care of your people – will make it likely that the current followers will get the unit through “tomorrow.” In an organization in which the leader has created more leaders – the third/legacy priority – the followers will insure that the organization continues to succeed after the leader is out of the picture for any reason.

The Leadership/Teamship/Followership Continuum

It is not true that some people are destined at birth to always be leaders while others are doomed to lifetimes as followers – or that once a person becomes a leader, he or she is forever free of the role of follower. The real world does not work like that.

Imagine, for instance, that a senior vice president arrives at work one morning and is immediately told by the president of the firm that, “Task A must be accomplished by 4:00 this afternoon.” After a details-focused – and short – discussion, the SVP would then retreat to his or her office and put out an immediate call to his or her direct reports, summoning them to be in the conference room in 15 minutes.

After announcing that Task A needs to be accomplished by 4:00 that afternoon, the SVP would engage his or her direct reports in a discussion that might well extend for several hours. Assuming they are an experienced team, the conversation should be efficient, with different direct reports taking the lead at different points as they examine all of the ramifications of determining a solution to Task A and to then putting the solution into place.

When a consensus is reached, the senior vice president would summarize their collective agreement and instruct the direct reports to return to their departments and begin putting things in motion while he or she goes to his or her office and writes out the official “This needs to be done beginning at 4:00 this afternoon” announcement – to be sent to everyone on the payroll. With a

comfortable margin of an hour or more, the SVP would be able to return to the president’s office and report, “All taken care of, boss.”

Is the senior vice president a leader? Or a follower? Or a teammate? When dealing with the president at the beginning and end of the day, the SVP was a follower – perhaps an active follower (e.g., when asking clarifying questions in the morning), but nevertheless a follower. When calling the meeting, summarizing the agreement and later sending out the “this needs to be done beginning at 4:00” directive, the SVP functioned as a leader. When the discussion was in full swing, with each person – depending on his or her expertise and personality – taking his or her turn at “center stage” in the conversation, the SVP was a teammate.

This often-frequent shifting of roles is explained and can thus be used as a teaching tool by the Leadership, Teamship, Followership, Continuum (see figure 1) which we introduced in various articles in 2007. The points on the scale are: L = “Big L” Leadership that is characterized by the making of decisions about allocation of resources and the acceptance for responsibility for those decisions; I = “small I” leadership which is the most common form of leadership, the face-to-face effort to direct the efforts of others toward a defined goal; AF = Active followership in which a person asks questions and make suggestions before following the directives of the leader; and PF = Passive Followership in which a person offers no input and contributes the minimal possible effort. Interestingly, the only two points on the continuum where loneliness is a problem are at the far left end and the far right end. At the infinite number of points in between, a person is always engaged with one or more other people – as a leader, as a follower, or as a teammate.

At any point in time, every person in an organization is somewhere on an LTFC – and their position on one does not necessarily determine their position on another. For instance, an employee whose “average position” on the company LTFC is to the right of middle may well be a choir director and/or a member of the city council. The person’s average position on either or those two LTFCs would be securely to the left of middle.

Summary

These three ideas about the concept and practice of leadership share one important characteristic: all three recognize the importance of the individual, of each member of the organization, in the ongoing effort to accomplish the mission while taking care of people and creating more leaders.

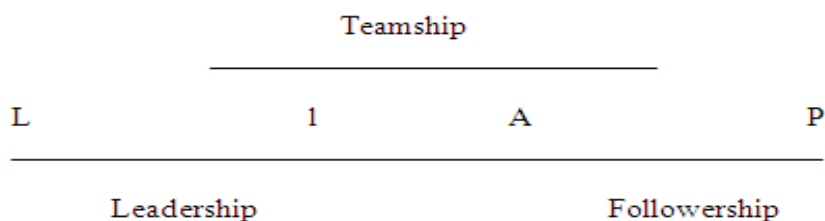


Figure 1. The Leadership/Teamship/Followership Continuum