

What Does Leadership Really Mean?

By

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When I started my Ph.D. studies in leadership, I was pretty sure that I knew what leadership was ... or at least what it should be based on 30 years of operational experience in business and even government operations. About half way through the process I decided I really didn't know as much as I thought. When I finished the program and went back out into the real world, I discovered that what I now know was really hard to describe in simple terms. Placing education aside, I also realized that most other people in the business world feel the same way. Defining leadership is not easy.

One of the things I did learn in recent years is that the majority of leadership theories we read about, are misinterpreted ... they are instead a variety of processes that provide insight into only small elements of what leadership is really about. My favorite leadership theory is the Hersey-Blanchard theory known to most as Situational Leadership. Basically this model suggests that successful leaders are those that adjust their leadership style to the maturity of the individual or groups they are leading. Meaning that the way you deal with experienced, self-sufficient people is different from the way you deal with inexperienced people new to the job or to work in general. This theory is spot on to the extent that it suggests an element of leadership. But this theory alone, like others, is not adequate to either describe a leader or to provide a fully adequate understanding of leadership.

In addition to a style, leaders are defined by a variety of other important characteristics and motivations. First of all, leaders have to desire to be leaders or at least be willing to accept all the responsibilities and obligations that leadership entails. Just because you are bonked on the head with a job title or are pushed forward by less responsible forces (people) is not adequate for one to embrace the label of leader. Leaders also have to want to take the lead for reasons other than self-aggrandizement or personal gain. Leaders are motivated not only to do a good job, but to also do the best for the individuals and groups they lead. People are important to a leader.

Perhaps the single greatest characteristic of a leader is the ability to work with and deal effectively with people. Some call this people skills. When you move beyond the role of individual contributor, you are automatically thrust into the world of people and groups. Your success depends largely on them. Time and time again people with leadership labels get de-railed because they fail to integrate with and work well with people. Some label this capability emotional intelligence, which is probably a fair observation. This type of intelligence combines a variety of skills that include empathy, self-awareness, impulse control and interpersonal relationship capability to name but a few. Research and science have proven that your ability to deal with people (emotional intelligence) is at least two times more important than intellect (IQ) in predicting individual and group performance.

Two other characteristics of effective leaders are to have a vision and the ability to communicate with others. The old saying that "if you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there" is quite famous. It clearly suggests that if we want to achieve our own or

organizational goals, we have to have a clear vision of what those goals are and at least a glimpse of how to get there. If a leader has a clear vision but lacks some of the details to achieve it, a true leader will build an effective team that will help plan the way.

Achieving the vision and the associated short term goals requires that a leader be able to communicate well. This does not mean having a great vocabulary and the ability to speak at length. Good communicators meet the audience with terms they understand and which are sufficiently detailed as to avoid ambiguity. A friend of mine from East Texas points out that simple is better. He suggests that rather than say to a group that non completion of the task may have adverse effects on the corporate resources, it may be better to say if we don't succeed, we could lose our jobs. Clear, simple communications are always best. Don't assume that people will understand what you want or need.

Leaders also have learned or been taught particular skills that non-leaders may lack. These take the form of everyday habits and tools that include but are not limited to: be willing to accept risk; always be willing to learn and ask questions; be a good listener; exercise patience; allow failure when possible; reward in public and discipline in private; lead by example; and accept change as a constant. There are more, but these should get the message across.

Finally, contrary to some popular but unenlightened views, we all need to be aware that leaders are made not born. You heard it correctly, there is no gene for leadership or the many skills that have been discussed. With few exceptions, we are borne to be what we want to be. Today's genetic and neuroscience research has proven that we are not slaves to our genes. Geneticists Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb (*Evolution in Four Dimensions*) confirm the view that the gene is not a simple causal agent in human development always producing the same effect. While genes are important, it is our environment (experiences, education, etc.) that is most significant in determining who and what we are. Nobel Prize winning neuroscientist and psychologist Eric Kandel (*In Search of Memory*) acknowledges this and further points out that a major key in our learning process is practice which cements our knowledge into long term memory. These and other scientists also note that learning is a lifelong process extending well into old age (90s).

So, leadership is a complex topic and not defined by a single theory. It requires: true motivation; a strong desire and ability to work with people (emotional intelligence); having a vision; being able to communicate; have a tool kit of everyday skills; a willingness to learn and listen; and the realization that leadership is a learned skill, not a genetic grant. Desire, education and practice are the keys to leadership development success.

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