

Leadership Is the Future, Management Is the Past

I propose we hereby kill the word “manager.” Kick it, shoot it, just be done with it. One of the longest running myths in the business world is that leaders and managers are somehow different. It is not true. Further, I genuinely believe that this myth has been harmful.

Invariably, the “leader” is said to be superior in various ways to the “manager.” There is no shortage of famous thinkers (Peter Druker, for example) who have helped perpetuate this myth. They draw two columns and name one “leaders” and the other “managers” and then fill out each column with behaviors or traits that are seemingly opposed.

To make my point, consider the list below pulled from a US government website (<http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0703/070703ff.htm>):

- A manager takes care of where you are; a leader takes you to a new place.
- A manager deals with complexity; a leader deals with uncertainty.
- A manager is concerned with finding the facts; a leader makes decisions.
- A manager is concerned with doing things right; a leader is concerned with doing the right things.
- A manager's critical concern is efficiency; a leader focuses on effectiveness.
- A manager creates policies; a leader establishes principles.
- A manager sees and hears what is going on; a leader hears when there is no sound and sees when there is no light.
- A manager finds answers and solutions; a leader formulates the questions and identifies the problems.
- A manager looks for similarities between current and previous problems; a leader looks for differences.

What? There are so many absurd statements in this list I honestly do not know where to begin.

Let's look at just one: “A manager deals with complexity; a leader deals with uncertainty.” Wait a minute – don't complexity and uncertainty go hand-in-hand? Assuming “managers” actually do exist, don't they also face uncertainty? Uncertainty crops up all the time!

What does the person who wrote this list expect us to do? What if someone in your group quits and creates uncertainty about how the group will function? What if a key vendor goes out of business with no other vendor available to do the same thing? Should all “managers” immediately fall to the carpet and weep while screaming wildly for some “leader” to save them from the uncertainty? *No!* It is a false dichotomy, the two are the same thing.

To understand leadership, first be clear about what leadership is not. It is not about using the latest greatest tools and methodologies (e.g., ERP, CRM, ISO, TQM – name whatever acronym you would like). It is not about singular great moments in the face of crises. These things are interesting, but they are not heart and soul of leadership.

What then is a leader? A leader is a person who does a good job every day of nailing the basics of effective interpersonal relationships such that his or her group performs at a high level. Most articles and books about leaders dwell far too long on the issues above, and many other issues like “vision” and “charisma.” All are overrated.

Leadership is about nailing the basics, for example: communicating effectively, being open and fair, motivating others, engaging conflicts productively, and developing others. Research clearly backs this up.

What is the best explanation for the morale and productivity of your group? It is not the charismatic CEO or the pay. The best answer by far is the quality of the interpersonal relationships that surround them every day: their subordinates, colleagues, and superiors.

Sure, leaders often deliver these basic skills using different styles. For example, consider communication as a core skill. A given message might be delivered quietly, succinctly and without great fanfare. A different leader might be loud, verbose and highly energetic. Is one better than the other? No.

The same test applies as to whether they were effective: was the communication specific, articulate, understood, etc. Style is interesting, but do not get distracted. The same thinking applies to any of the basic leadership skills.

Good news – you may not have known when you started this article whether you were a leader. Now you know. You are all leaders. Your goal: do not be a stinky leader. Nail the basics.

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