

Application of Leadership Concepts: A Personal Approach

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Concept of Leadership

There are a myriad of leadership definitions and they vary in complexity. For instance, Dwight Eisenhower made a simple, pragmatic definition when he stated, “Leadership is the ability to decide what is to be done, and then getting others to do it” (Larson, 1968). A more complex definition, however, was presented by Cleeton and Mason (1934) when they stated, “Leadership indicates the ability to influence men and secure results through emotional appeals rather than through the exercise of authority.”

The key concept in these as well as most other leadership definitions appears to be a person’s ability to organize their followers and directing them toward a common goal. The way to do it depends on factors such as the conditions of their situation and the nature of the people being lead. For instance, an authoritarian monarch may command his subjects and expect unquestioned obedience. A corporate executive, on the other hand, may take a democratic approach of seeking the opinion of her subordinates in developing a strategy to achieve a

mutually desired outcome. Consequently, the meaning of leadership may depend on the kind of institution in which it is found (Bass & Stogdill, 1990).

In addition to being institution dependent, leadership is more precisely defined in the context of other dimensions. Bass (Wren, 1995) summarizes these when he stated,

“Leadership has been conceived as the focus of group processes, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as initiation of structure, and as many combinations of these definitions (p. 38).

Therefore, it seems that leadership definitions are, at a minimum, a function of people, place, position, personality, power, and purpose.

Leadership Characteristics

From ancient time to the postmodern period, theorists have produced a wide array of personal characteristics and skills in their effort to define an ideal leader. Early period attributes related to a leader being a singular source of authority and being endowed with unique qualities that allowed them to capture their follower’s imagination. Many of these attributes emphasized a leader’s physical characteristics, social background, and personality. However, the evolution of leadership theory has produced additional leadership characteristics that emphasize a leader’s personal interrelationship with followers. In fact, Stogdill’s 1970 leadership characteristics survey indicated that the most important leadership attributes are sociability and interpersonal skills; a 40% increase over a similar survey conducted in 1948 (Bass & Stogdill, 1990, p. 81).

Certain core leadership characteristics appear to be consistent over time. These include honesty, morality, high energy levels, and respect for followers. In addition Bass (1990) states,

The leader is characterized by a strong drive for responsibility and completion of tasks, vigor and persistence in the pursuit of goals, venturesomeness and originality in problem solving, drive to exercise initiative in social situations, self-confidence and a sense of personal identity, willingness to accept the consequences of his or her decisions and actions, ready to absorb interpersonal stress, willingness to tolerate frustration and delay, ability to influence other people's behavior, and the capacity to structure social interaction systems to the purpose at hand (p. 87).

Leaders not only need these characteristics but they should keep focused on the future, maintain a systems approach in their thinking, and be oriented toward developing a network of contacts that provide long term benefit his organization (Kantor, 1995).

Being aware of leadership characteristics appears to be an important component of developing a personal action plan to become a more effective leader. It seems logical, however, to determine the relative importance of various characteristics in order to focus more attention on higher-ranking attributes. In this regard, Kouzes and Posner (1993) conducted a survey where they had their subjects rank leadership characteristics in order of importance. The results listed in Table 1 show that the top rated characteristics concern honesty, vision, and inspiration. These findings agree with similar importance posited by other leadership authorities such as O'Toole (1996), Kantor (1995), and Kidder (1995).

Table 1

Kouzes and Posner's Leadership Characteristics
Ranked in Order of Importance

1. Honest	11. Dependable
2. Forward-Looking	12. Cooperative
3. Inspiring	13. Imaginative
4. Competent	14. Caring
5. Fair-Minded	15. Mature
6. Supportive	16. Determined
7. Broad minded	17. Ambitious
8. Intelligent	18. Loyal
9. Straight-Forward	19. Self-Controlled
10. Courageous	20. Independent

Leadership and Management

Although all managers perform the traditional management functions of planning, organizing, staffing, controlling and directing, it seems that the higher the management level within an organization the more important it is for the manager to practice a greater degree of leadership skills. At high management levels the manager's duties are concerned less with the minutia of running the organization and more on setting strategic goals and maintaining corporate direction while listening carefully to their subordinates and responding thoughtfully (O'Toole, 1996). Furthermore, Roby (1961) declares,

The functions of leadership are to (1) bring about a congruence of goals among the members, (2) balance the group's resources and capabilities with environmental demands, (3) provide a group structure that is necessary to focus information effectively on solving the problem, and (4) make certain that all needed information is available at a decision center when required (p. 383).

In developing a personal leadership action plan, not only is it important for the leader to be cognizant of leadership functions but she should also understand the different styles of leadership and how to apply them relative to various situations. Research by Goldman (2000) suggests that the most effective executives use a collection of leadership skills, each in the right measure, and at just the right time. The problem is that most leaders are not aware of all of the different types of leadership styles and those that do are not always sure how to use them.

Goleman (2000) conducted a study in which he found that effective leaders must have a certain level of emotional intelligence as well as leadership skill. He defined emotional intelligence as a leader's ability to manage themselves and their relationships relative to the four emotional capabilities of self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and social skill. Next, the research showed that there are six leadership styles that spring from these emotional capabilities. These are coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching.

The key to successful leadership, therefore, is determining under which situations to employ a given style and when to switch to another style. A good example is Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric. He is noted for using an affiliative style where he creates harmony and emotional bonds with his employees. In certain situations, however, he may switch to a coercive style and demand immediate action such as getting employees to comply with federal regulations. Other times he may use a democratic style to build consensus through participation.

He also serves as a pacesetter leader to demand excellence and self-direction. Often Welch exhibits coaching leadership in order to develop employees for the future.

Goleman (2000, p. 12) recommends that leaders master as many of the six leadership styles as possible and use them to create a state of “fluid leadership”. His research shows that leaders that do this are generally more successful than those who do not.

Moral Leadership

There seems to be considerable attention focused on the moral attributes of leaders such as honesty, integrity, compassion, and courage. O’Toole (1996, p. 16) describes this phenomenon as “values-based leadership” and posits that good ethics and morality directly influence a person’s leadership quality. He points out that leadership based solely on contingency theory typically relies on a relativistic approach to ethics. Consequently, leaders will employ tactics that are relative to achieving acceptable results in the current situation without regard for long-term effects. Furthermore, if a leader has good core values, he should work to get his followers to adopt these values as their own and in so doing, will reduce resistance to leadership (O’Toole, 1996).

In addition to good core values, leaders should be fully cognizant of the relationship between honesty and trust especially since followers regard honesty as the most important leadership characteristic according to Table 1. In fact, Covey (Mahoney, 1997) points out that honesty is the basis for building trust between leaders and their followers. Trust provides the foundation of establishing mutual respect which should then produce mutual benefits such as increasing group synergy and improving understanding between leaders and their organization’s stakeholders.

Application Plan

Based on the many definitions of leadership, leadership characteristics, and various leadership styles, this writer has developed a leadership philosophy for understanding the various reality-defining characteristics of people within an organization, for establishing trust, and to encourage followers in their professional growth. This means that not only is it important to exhibit the characteristics presented in Table 1, but that leadership styles like those posited by Goleman (2000) should be used relative to a particular employee group and situation.

This philosophy is particularly important in the writer's current position of information systems manager for a large construction company. This position requires close contact with upper and mid-management in order to ascertain their information requirements, provide viable solutions, and resolve problems. It also requires frequent interaction with an end-user community that includes personnel from executive managers to field supervisors. Complications arise, however, because of the employee's different education levels, work discipline perspectives, and demographic background. In this regard, the leadership philosophy provides a framework for understanding and managing these differences in order to make effective decisions for the company.

A personal action plan has been developed in order to improve this writer's leadership skills and increase his leadership potential. It includes the following elements:

1. Continuous education in leadership related courses.
2. Conduct leadership skills presentation in the executive manager's weekly meeting at this writer's organization.
3. Establish a one-month temporary residency in each company facility to analyze their actual culture and leadership skills and make improvement recommendations.
4. Organize a weekend leadership conference for March 2002.

Conclusion

The management and leadership issues at the gateway to the 21st Century stem from new social, demographic, and economic realities that no government can successfully address. They are issues that only insightful, articulate individual managers can resolve (Drucker, 1999). Furthermore, 21st Century organizations will be larger, more complex and more dynamic than in the past and will exert an even greater influence on our lives and on the world. Consequently, leadership is one of the most challenging and important responsibilities a person can assume. To be highly effective, however, leaders must be systems thinkers with the capacity to develop a global view of the organization, they must be culturally articulate, participate in continuous professional education, and maintain high standards of morality and personal behavior (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1997).

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