THE LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP: AN INTERACTIVE COLUMN

Titles Don't Make Leaders
July 19, 2004

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Stever Robbins (HBS MBA ’91) writes The Leadership Workshop, an interactive monthly column answering questions from readers on management issues. Feel free to ask him a question for possible inclusion in future columns.

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All of the talk about "leadership" often ignores the fact that leadership is powerful at any and all levels—and that you do not need to be heading up an organization to be an effective leader. Some of the most effective business people that I know are in roles that are not supervisory. But they can move teams and individuals better than some (most) managers—precisely because they know when it's appropriate to lead and when it's appropriate to follow. Many so-called "leaders" have not mastered this! How would you respond?

"Lead, follow, or get out of the way."—Anonymous

If you have ever been on a team with more than one self-styled leader, you have seen dysfunction at its finest. In-fighting, lack of agreement, sneakiness, and outright sabotage cause things to crash and burn. But is anyone surprised? If you're a "leader" on a team, asking how you can lead or follow, you may have already failed. "Lead or follow" makes it sound like the two are mutually exclusive. Not so. The confusion comes because we don't know what it means to lead.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth." It happens mainly when everyone is trying to tell everyone else what to do. That isn't leading; that's micromanaging, and it's not part of the leader's job.

A leader's job is to ensure the success of the organization—no matter who reports to whom in any given group. At every moment she should be asking, "Is what I'm doing helping the group to succeed?" Sometimes we think we are helping, but we are just raising the group's blood pressure with our behavior. You might even ask the group, in addition to yourself. If the answer is yes, you are doing the right thing; keep doing it. If the answer is no, stop! Decide you'll start being part of the solution, and find a way to bring your basic leadership skills to the fore.

Setting the course

Your basic job is setting direction, not giving directions. If it's your organization you are working with, by all means make sure to assert yourself in determining the highest-level goals of the group. But if you are in a group where it's not your responsibility to set direction, then don't. Only do it if the team has no charter and the team has not previously agreed on direction.

The group was presumably assembled for a reason—that's the charter. Help remind the group why it exists, but don't go changing its reason. If the basic charter must change, that's the job of the group's sponsor. Of course, in the extremely unlikely event you run across the group with no clear charter and no clear owner, consider it an invite for a land grab. Cram your direction down the team's throat, and enlarge your empire just a bit more.

Ducks in a row
Another aspect of your job is aligning teams. Usually you align your own team, but nothing says you can't spread the love when working with others. Once the goals are clear, help everyone match their part of the job. Offer your help to the group, but don't force yourself on them. If you see someone screwing up big time, ask them questions to explore the link between their actions and their goals. Be humble! Ask with genuine curiosity, "Could you help me understand the link between the insanity you're engaged in and what you believe to be the goal?"

Sometimes you'll learn the insanity makes sense, and you're wrong. They're doing something you never thought of. Other times, you will find you must ask further questions to help them understand where their plans need shoring up. If they remain dead set on the wrong course, it's your call: Let them learn or make a stink. In my experience, if someone is smart, it's usually safest to give them the benefit of the doubt. They may surprise you. If you decide to battle, think carefully. Choose battles wisely, as they're a poor use of time and, often, issues that seem earth-shattering now just aren't in the long run.

Is this leading or following? You are certainly following the group charter. You are certainly helping group members figure out how to support the group. And as long as you are committed to the success of the group, you are leading. Even if you aren't the one giving directions.

**Support your mates**

The other leadership skill you can bring to any group is support. Toss out the image of leader as someone in the 37th floor office, aloof from the teeming masses. When work is getting done, the leader is the least important team member. Your job is to make it easy for everyone else to get their jobs done. If that means taking out the trash and picking up low fat, low carb, organic pizza for the team so they can work straight through, then so be it. And you can really go the extra mile and (don't faint) support a team even if it isn't yours! If that's what is needed to help the business succeed, go for it. It's a much needed, often hyped, but rarely practiced virtue called teamwork. Is taking out the trash leading or following? It doesn't matter. It's getting the job done.

So you like control. Get over it. When you're in a team, don't ask whether or not you're leading it; ask whether or not you're contributing to its success. Stop being dazzled by your own brilliance. Spend your time helping people know where they are going, link their actions to the goals, and support them as they get there. You'll be perceived as a leader, regardless of title. The team will succeed, the business will succeed, and you can say, "I helped."

"But wait," you say, "how will I make sure I'm making a difference that matters if I'm just taking out the trash?" That's the point. Sometimes, taking out the trash is the most powerful way to lead. Remember, two billion years from now, we'll all be a frozen hunk of ice, so don't sweat the small stuff, and fighting over leading a team is small stuff. 🌕

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