

LEADING FROM WITHIN, PART II



Contrary to conventional wisdom, leadership is not scarce; it is simply underdeveloped. Relying on innate wisdom, managers can ascend through three levels: Leaders of Self, Leaders of Others, Leaders of Leaders.

Leadership is one of our most valuable resources, yet we continually hear the lament that leadership is our scarcest commodity. Few businesses lack good ideas or money, but many lack the leadership to take full advantage of opportunities that are clearly within their grasp.

But what if what if we were to assume that leadership is not the scarcest but the most abundant resource? What if we saw clearly that every person in a company has the potential to see what needs doing and to get it done?

We would discover that leadership is not scarce at all, simply overlooked and underdeveloped. Every employee has latent leadership skills and abilities. Superior "leaders" are those who see the abundance of leadership potential and help their organizations harvest it. The extent to which companies cultivate and harvest their employees' innate leadership is the hallmark of successful companies.

Reflecting

Reflection is the art of listening to our inner voice for insights about a question and accessing intelligence that may go beyond our personal knowledge or experience. It is the process of quieting our mind sufficiently to frame a question, seeing what insights occur by listening to ourselves, and then taking those insights to a deeper level of understanding.

Reflective thinking is at the heart of all good meetings. The more reflective the thought, the shorter the meeting and the more that is accomplished. Rather than letting participants talk past one another, a reflective leader urges them to listen more deeply to what they are saying. It is a process of slowing down the discussion by saying things like, "Please tell us more about your thought," "What about that is true for you?" or "Can you elaborate this or that aspect of your idea?"

This can take fortitude for groups often want to forge ahead, generating their "lists" rather than taking time to reflect on what they are actually saying. This flurry of activity creates the illusion that much is being done, when in reality the problem is not being solved.

As we become more adept at reflection, it is easier to listen to others. Good leaders are known for their reflective and listening skills.

Exploring

Exploration is the process of helping others step into the unknown. How do graceful leaders help themselves and others do this?

First, leaders begin by clearly articulating a goal. One of the best examples of this was John F. Kennedy's challenge to the nation to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s. Since business is about accomplishing work through collective energy, leaders need to give direction so that exploration has a purpose.

"Mucking around" is a critical element of exploration. When a team is looking to do something uncommon, they are inevitably going to take wrong turns and follow false leads. Understanding what is *not* known is an essential component of seeing what needs to be learned. The leader of the team must stay committed to exploration and help the group keep their bearings. The leader's confidence can be contagious and help everyone see things more clearly.

In the face of an urgently posed question or a challenge, the leader should be self-effacing enough to say, "I don't know." This frees the leader from the burden of always having to come up with the right answers and empowers others to think for themselves. It also secures "buy in" for self-generated solutions. How different this is from leaders who try to sell people on their ideas or, even worse, tell their people what to do!

Exploration is based on hope, the knowledge that there are possibilities beyond what is already known. Hope helps people let go of negative thoughts and free their minds to be creative. Tapping inner intelligence requires a release from the mental prison of egocentric thinking -- hard to do when leaders have self-esteem at stake, but easy when they are not thinking about themselves.

Leaders encourage members of the group to step back from their own "right answers" and listen more deeply to one another. As people do this, they begin to see things differently. Suddenly, what they were holding so dear looks ridiculous. Shifts in thinking can be tangible as people see a third way -- one that integrates conflicting points of view, takes the best ideas and puts them to work.

Understanding

Understanding helps us establish a more human connection in dealings with others. When leaders look for the innocence in people's actions instead of cluttering their minds with blame and suspicion, people feel respected and valued. This frees them to turn their full attention to the business matters at hand and to give their best.

Kindness is another state of mind that promotes well-being in organizations. It can be nothing more than small acts that help people work through problems or balance home and family commitments. Kind acts rarely require an investment of money because what is really valued is the commitment of others to help in time of need.

Applying the Principles to Leadership

Each of us has a set of "thinking habits" about the value of a quiet state of mind, the importance of decisions based on insight and the innate leadership abilities of others.

These thinking habits typically lead to three distinct leadership styles within a company: leader of self, leader of others and leader of leaders.

Leaders of Self

Every company has many people who are making significant contributions. Frequently leaders of self, or strong individual contributors, are diligent and driven to succeed and have earned a reputation for getting things done. Individual contributors solve their own problems, often with little effort, and are motivated by their own goals or agenda. Direct recognition is well received and expected.

Because individual contributors are typically able to access their inner wisdom easily, they are often unaware that others have not developed this gift to the same degree. They come to meetings with their answers already worked out, looking to be understood by others or to sway them. They may fail to notice the mood of the others in the meeting or see it as something to be "dealt with." Because they are focused narrowly on their own responsibilities and performance, they rarely develop the talent of those around them or inspire them to new heights. While individual contributors contribute much to organizations, they fall short of their potential because their leadership is directed inward.

Leaders of Others

Leaders of others tend to have a deeper understanding of themselves and those around them. They are committed to serving others as well as themselves. They hold the well-being, growth and accomplishments of others foremost in their thoughts and act accordingly. For them the question is less "what do I need to do?" and more "what needs doing for the group?" Reflecting on this question helps everyone tap into his or her own collective wisdom and common sense.

Typically, leaders of others believe they are "accountable" for their team's performance and look for recognition based on their team's success. What limits the growth of such leaders is their sense that their role is more important than that of the other members of the team. The difference between ordinary work groups and high-performing work teams lies in the group's belief in the leadership capability of each team member and in each individual's ability to stay in a leadership frame of mind.

Leaders of Leaders

The primary role of a leader of leaders is to release and nourish the leadership in others. Such leaders take satisfaction in seeing others excel. In particular, they seek to lead with creativity, freshness, ease, warmth, and grace and to draw out the innate intelligence and wisdom of others. They are on a journey, themselves. A high level of reflection begets their curiosity. This is why they are such good teachers, for teachers are first students. They ask the questions that stimulate the thirst for greater understanding.

Leaders of leaders are not interested in creating followers who mimic them. Quite the contrary. They seek out people who are independent-minded and good listeners. They look to feelings first, since feelings point to the quality of thought. Warm, positive feelings lead to great outcomes that endure, while anxious, self-important thoughts lead to superficial gains dearly purchased.

Summary

Transitioning from an organization of individual contributors to one of leaders of leaders is a journey that enables an organization to better harvest the leadership talent of its people. This journey requires leaps of faith. It also challenges ingrained individual or cultural thinking habits.

Changing thinking habits is not inherently complex, but it is challenging. Consider the following questions to help you become more aware of your own thinking habits:

- Am I responding to my own ego?
- Do I allow myself some quiet time to reflect (or I am I booking my schedule fully, going from one project/meeting to the next without break)?
- Am I asking questions of others, to elicit a full understanding of their thoughts or statements?
- Am I thinking in terms of puzzles, rather than crises?
- Do I look for blame or innocence in what others tell me?
- Do I spend time thinking about issues, or jump to conclusions as rapidly as possible?
- Am I comfortable admitting that I do not know the answer?

When we are leading well, our minds are calm; and our thinking is clear. When we are leading poorly, our minds are busy; and our thinking is muddled. Those who commit themselves to understanding their own intelligence and common sense will find that leading comes naturally as their inner wisdom becomes more and more accessible. They will see the same in those they work with or lead. Once this virtuous circle has begun, they will find that there is no limit to their depth of understanding and insight.

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