



Leave Your Ego at the Door

By

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Leadership is full of incongruities. It often requires obedience to competing interests and figuring out how to adequately serve each.

It may seem strange to use the, "Lead me, follow me, or get the hell out of my way" quote attributed to Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., but it seems to be a good place to start.

Often taking Patton's quote to heart, one of the first things that happen when a new manager takes over is to implement their own way of doing things. There's a timeworn and mocking observation that expresses this tendency, "Great idea but not my idea". It is an exhibition of the all too human impulse to immediately throw the baby out with the bath water when taking over a new leadership role. In effect, the action is an assertion of authority, and as it were, a marking out of the parameters of one's newly acquired territory.

Two things are true about leadership: 1). it is all about earning some level of implicit and then explicit trust, and 2). No one can tell you how to lead because it is a highly individualized skill set. Much depends on personality, individual level of experience, the context of the situation, and the resident level of implicit trust residing within the group being led.

At best, learning how to lead comes down to observation, emulation, and rejection. Observing how others lead; attempting to emulate those leadership traits and methods that you admire in others; and rejecting those methods that do not produce the outcomes you had hoped for. At worst, all an experienced leader can give you is some situational advice on what not to do as a leader.

This article is meant to be that sort of advice.

Observation:

There is a lot of bullying behavior in the workplaces of today. Bullies -- someone who is habitually cruel, insulting, or threatening to others who are weaker, smaller, or in some way vulnerable -- can force obedience, but they can never lead. A bully is too wrapped up in their own psychological gratification to truly lead. The objective of achieving some group goal is replaced by their unquenchable need to assert their will over others.

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There are those, of course, who are not bullies themselves, but who seek to emulate those who are. In some instances, they make the mistake of imitating bullying behavior found in their role models. In other circumstances, their motivation may be found in the adaptive behavior of either peer group pressure or more widely in social group norms. Contrarily, it may simply be explained by bad behavior that is enabled by others for any number of ill-reasoned excuses.

Emulation:

We tend to emulate those we admire. In the end, the true leader is a teacher -- a coach, a mentor -- not just pointing to those around them the next thing to be done, nor the proper path forward to achieve the group goal, but rather to teach them what they know of leadership and management. Ultimately, the goal of any leader is to prepare the next generation to take over roles of leadership in their own right. The best way to teach leadership is to allow others to take on some of the responsibilities of leadership themselves. To discuss decisions, and to invite others to voice alternative paths or to suggest improvements. True leaders do not need to be the sole source of wisdom; they are willing to adopt the good ideas of others.

Rejection:

If we emulate behavior we admire, then contrarily most of us certainly try to avoid those behaviors that we strongly feel to be wrong or misplaced. We have all been saddled with managers who can't manage, and whatever their concept of leadership may be, it certainly doesn't feel like we were being coached or mentored in any significant way. Somehow, these individuals lack -- to one extent or another -- the all-important ability of introspection, the examination of one's own thoughts and feelings within the framework of the impact of our actions upon others.

In most instances, there are no technologically or functionally incompetent managers; there are inconsiderate managers; there are secretive managers, and there are managers who refuse to communicate. All the technological dinosaur baby boomers have mostly moved on to retirement. Again, my general working assumption is that most managers have not been given the opportunity to develop their own leadership style. Unschooled and under considerable pressure to produce, it is not surprising an approach that appears to be the easiest way forward.

One of the most telling indicators of a poor leader is their use of the singular personal pronoun, "I" and "me", rather than the more inclusive plural "We" and "us" is a telling glimpse into an individual's psychology. Excluding individuals from group membership matters to the ones being excluded. The would-be leader who verbally excludes themselves from the group psychologically distances themselves and undercuts the viability of their own leadership efforts. Leadership is inclusive; a leader should be considered first among equals, a full member of the group who has an acknowledged special role and duties.

Good managers and good leaders communicate situations and facts that are sufficiently accurate to support the goal attainment of the group. That does not imply they disclose all information. Often full disclosure only accomplishes the group to lose focus on their primary objective and tasks. If they are not free to disclose information, a good leader does not flinch from saying so, unapologetically.

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Openly withholding information that is either irrelevant or distracting to the group functioning effectively or efficiently, is quite different from the deliberate act of withholding information that is embarrassing, unethical, or devious.

Leadership is all about being responsible for both the outcomes of goals and tasks, as well as the health, welfare and personal growth of all those who work under your direction.

A piece of advice to all would-be leaders: leave your ego at the door.