

Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge

Summary of book

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Many people talk about the decline of the work ethic. In reality, it is not the work ethic which has declined. Rather, it is leaders who have failed. Leaders have failed to instill vision, meaning and trust in their followers. They have failed to empower them. Regardless of whether we're looking at organizations, government agencies, institutions or small enterprises, the key and pivotal factor needed to enhance human resources is leadership.

Commonalities Among Leaders

1. All leaders face the challenge of overcoming resistance to change. Some try to do this by the simple exercise of power and control, but effective leaders learn that there are better ways to overcome resistance to change. This involves the achievement of voluntary commitment to shared values.
2. A leader often must broker the needs of constituencies both within and outside the organization. The brokering function requires sensitivity to the needs of many stakeholders and a clear sense of the organization's position.
3. The leader is responsible for the set of ethics or norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization. Leaders can establish a set of ethics in several ways. One is to demonstrate by their own behavior their commitment to the set of ethics that they are trying to institutionalize.

The Four Strategies

- Strategy I: Attention Through Vision
- Strategy II: Meaning Through Communication
- Strategy III: Trust Through Positioning
- Strategy IV: The Deployment of Self Through Positive Self Regard

Leadership is the marshaling of skills possessed by a majority but used by a minority. It is also something that can be learned by anyone, taught to everyone, and denied to no one. In life, only a few will lead nations, but more will lead companies. Even more will lead departments or small groups. Those who aren't department heads will probably be supervisors. Like other complex skills, some people start out with more fully formed leadership abilities than others. But what we determined is that the four strategies can be learned, developed, and improved upon.

Strategy I: Attention Through Vision

*All men dream; but not
equally Those who dream
by night in the dusty
recesses of their minds
Awake to find that it
was vanity; But the
dreamers of day are
dangerous men, That
they may act their
dreams with open eyes
to make it possible.*

-T.E. Lawrence

I have a dream

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Create a new vision

The effective leader must assemble a vision of a desired future state for the organization. While this task may be shared and developed with other key members of the organization, it remains the leader's core responsibility and cannot be delegated. With a vision, the leader provides the all-important bridge from the present to the future of the organization.

Management of attention through vision is the creating of focus. Leaders are the most results-oriented individuals in the world, and results get attention. Their visions or intentions are compelling and pull people toward them. Intensity coupled with commitment is magnetic. And these intense personalities do not have to coerce people to pay attention; they are so intent on what they are doing that they draw others in.

Vision grabs.

In all these cases, the leader may have been the one who chose the image from those available at the moment, articulated it, gave it form and legitimacy, and focused attention on it, but the leader only rarely was the one who conceived of vision in the first place. Therefore, the leader must be a superb listener, particularly to those advocating new or different images of the emerging reality. Many leaders establish both formal and informal channels of communication to gain access to these ideas. Most leaders also spend a substantial portion of their time interacting with advisors, consultants, other leaders, scholars, planners, and a wide variety of other people both inside and outside their own organizations in this search. Successful leaders, we have found, are great askers, and they do pay attention.

Vision and Organizations

To choose a direction, a leader must first have developed a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization. This image, which we call a vision, may be as vague as a dream or as precise as a goal or mission statement. The critical point is that a vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists.

A vision is a target that beckons. When John Kennedy set a goal of putting a man on the moon by 1970, or Sanford Weill aimed to make American Express the world's leading investment banking company in five years, they were focusing attention on worthwhile and attainable achievements. Note that a vision always refers to a future state, a condition that does not presently exist.

To understand why vision is so central to leadership success, we only need reflect on why organizations are formed in the first place. An organization is a group of people engaged in a common enterprise. Individuals join the enterprise in the hope of receiving rewards for their participation. Depending upon the organization and the individuals involved, the rewards might be largely economic, or they might be dominated by psychosocial considerations - status, self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, a meaningful existence. Just as the individual derives rewards from his or her role in the organization, so too does the organization derive its rewards from finding an appropriate niche in the larger society.

So, on the one hand, an organization seeks to maximize its rewards from its position in the external environment and, on the other hand, individuals in the organization seek to maximize their reward from their participation in the organization. When the organization has a clear sense of its purpose, direction, and desired future state and when this image is widely shared, individuals are able to find their own roles both in the organization and in the larger society.

Strategy II: Meaning Through Communication

*If you can dream it you
can do it*

-Walt Disney

This quote from Disney figures high on a sign at Epcot in Orlando, Florida. However, believing in one's dreams is not enough. There are a lot of intoxicating visions and a lot of noble intentions. Many people have rich and deeply textured agendas, but without communication nothing else will be realized. Success requires the capacity to relate a compelling image of a desired state of affairs - the kind of image that induces enthusiasm and commitment in others.

How do you capture imaginations? How do you communicate visions? How do you get people aligned behind the organization's goals? How do you get an audience to recognize and accept an idea? Workers have to recognize and get something of established identity. The management of meaning and mastery of communication is inseparable from effective

leadership.

After the leader creates a vision and mobilizes commitment, perhaps the most difficult challenge begins, that of institutionalizing the new vision and mission.

A number of lessons can be drawn from the experiences of leaders. First, and perhaps most important, is that all organizations depend on the existence of shared meanings and interpretations of reality, which facilitate coordinated action. The actions and symbols of leadership frame and mobilize meaning. Leaders articulate and define what has previously remained implicit or unsaid; they invent images, metaphors, and models that provide a focus for new attention. By so doing, they consolidate or challenge prevailing wisdom. In short, an essential factor in leadership is the capacity to influence and organize meaning for the members of the organization.

Develop Commitment for the New Vision

The organization must be mobilized to accept and support the new vision - to make it happen. At GM, Roger Smith took his top 900 executives on a five-day retreat to share and discuss the company's vision. Of course, it doesn't take five days to share one short mission statement and eight objectives. But commitment requires more than verbal compliance, more than just dialogue and exchange. At the very least, the vision has to be articulated clearly and frequently in a variety of ways, from "statements of policy" that have minimum impact to revising recruiting aims and methods, training that is explicitly geared to modify behavior in support of new organizational values, and, not the least, adapting and modifying shared symbols that signal and reinforce the new vision.

Words, symbols, articulations, training and recruiting, while necessary, don't go far enough. Changes in the management processes, the organizational structure, and management style all must support the changes in the pattern of values and behavior that a new vision implies.

Strategy III: Trust Through Positioning

*Fail to honor people
They fail to honor you;
but of a good leader,
who talks little, When
his work is done, his
aim fulfilled, They will
say, "We did this
ourselves."*

-Lao Tzu

Nothing in the world

can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with great talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

-From a plaque on the wall of Ray Kroc

The difference between human organizations and other organisms is the central importance of the time dimension. In most natural systems, change occurs very slowly and is often measured in thousands of years. In human systems, change can occur very rapidly. As a result, nothing is more important to modern organizations than their effectiveness in coping with change. Whereas other organisms change as a result of natural selection, organizations change as a result of specific choices that they make themselves.

The leader's vision for the organization must be clear, attractive, and attainable. We tend to trust leaders who create these visions, since vision represents the context for shared beliefs in a common organizational purpose. The leader's positions must be clear. We tend to trust leaders when we know where they stand in relation to the organization and how they position the organization relative to their environment.

There are four main strategies that leaders choose (sometimes unwittingly) in order to position their organization:

1. Reactive.

With this approach, the organization waits for change and reacts - after the fact. Some leaders who operate in this fashion act through default. In other, possibly more effective cases, a reactive strategy is designed to keep options open and to provide the necessary flexibility to cope with a wide range of occurrences. A reactive mode is the least expensive (and often the most shortsighted) strategy; it may occasionally work, but only in slowly changing environments that allow enough lead time to react.

2. Change the internal environment.

Rather than waiting for change to happen to them, leaders can develop effective forecasting procedures to anticipate change and then "proact" rather than react. In the short run, they can reposition the organization by granting or withholding funds, manpower or facilities to parts of the organization expected to be affected by the changes.

In the long run, internal environments can be changed in a more enduring way by altering internal organizational structures; by training and education; by selection, hiring, and firing; and by deliberate efforts to design a corporate culture that develops certain values.

3. Change the external environment.

This approach requires that the organization anticipating change act upon the environment itself to make the change congenial to its needs. This might be done through advertising and lobbying efforts, collaboration with other organizations, creating new marketing niches through entrepreneurship and innovation, and various other means.

4. Establish a new linkage between the external and internal environments.

Using this new mechanism, an organization anticipating change will attempt to establish a new relationship between its internal environments and anticipated external environments. In the short run, this can be done by bargaining and negotiation, where both the internal and external environments change to accommodate each other more effectively.

Trust implies accountability, predictability, reliability. Trust is the emotional glue that binds followers and leaders together. The accumulation of trust is a measure of the legitimacy of leadership. It cannot be mandated or purchased; it must be earned. Trust is the basic ingredient of all organizations, the lubricant that maintains the organization, and, as we said earlier, it is as mysterious and elusive a concept as leadership - and as important.

One thing we can say for sure about trust is that if trust is to be generated, there must be predictability, the capacity to predict another's behavior.

Strategy IV: The Development of Self Through Positive Self-Regard

*My intentions always
have been to arrive at
human contact without
enforcing authority. A
musician, after all, is
not a military officer.
What matters most is
human contact. The*

*great mystery of music
making requires real
friendship among those
who work together.*
Angeles Philharmonic

-Conductor, Los

*Every member of the
orchestra knows I am
with him and her in my
heart.*

-Carlo Maria Giulini

Many leaders use five key skills:

1. The ability to accept people as they are, not as you would like them to be. In a way, this can be seen as the height of wisdom - to "enter the skin" of someone else, to understand what other people are like on their terms, rather than judging them.
2. The capacity to approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past. Certainly it is true that we can learn from past mistakes. But using the present as a takeoff point for trying to make fewer mistakes seems to be more productive for most leaders - and certainly is more psychologically sound than rehashing things that are over.
3. The ability to treat those who are close to you with the same courteous attention that you extend to strangers and casual acquaintances. The need for this skill is often the most obvious - and lacking - in our relationships with our own families. But it is equally important at work. We tend to take for granted those whom we are closest to. Often we get so accustomed to seeing them and hearing from them that we lose our ability to listen to what they are really saying or to appreciate the quality, good or bad, of what they are doing.
4. The ability to trust others, even if the risk seems great. A withholding of trust is often necessary for self-protection. But, the price is too high if it means always being on guard and being constantly suspicious of others. Even an overdose of trust that at times involves the risk of being deceived or disappointed is wiser, in the long run, than taking it for granted that most people are incompetent or insincere.
5. The ability to do without constant approval and recognition from others. Particularly in a work situation, the need for constant approval can be harmful and counterproductive. It should not really matter how many people like leaders. The important thing is the quality of work that results from collaborating with them. The emotionally wise leader realizes that this quality will suffer when undue emphasis is placed on being a "good guy." More important, it is a large part of the leader's job to take risks. And risks by their very nature cannot be pleasing to everyone.

Perhaps the most impressive and memorable quality of the leaders we studied was the way they responded to failure. Like Karl Wallenda, the great tightrope aerialist - whose life was at

stake each time he walked the tightrope - these leaders put all their energies into their task. They simply don't think about failure, don't even use the word, relying on such synonyms as "mistake," "glitch," "bungle," or countless others such as "false start," "mess," "hash," "bollix," "setback," and "error." Never FAILURE. One of them said during the course of an interview that "a mistake is just another way of doing things." Another said, "If I have an art form of leadership, it is to make as many mistakes as quickly as I can in order to learn."

Leaders Are Perpetual Learners

Learning is the essential fuel for the leader, the source of high-octane energy that keeps up the momentum by continually sparking new understanding, new ideas, and new challenges. If the leader is seen as an effective learner from the environment, others will emulate that model, much as a child emulates a parent or a student emulates a teacher.

While the leader provides the stimulus and focus for innovative learning, some organizations are learning-handicapped. They just seem to be so rigid and inflexible that nothing less than a major crisis can change them. That's the bad news. The good news is that leaders can redesign organizations to become more receptive to learning. They can do this by redesigning open organizations that are both participative and anticipative.

Individuals learn as part of their daily activities, particularly as they interact with each other and the outside world. Groups learn as their members cooperate to accomplish common goals. What the leader hopes to do is to unite the people in the organization into a "responsible community," a group of interdependent individuals who take responsibility for the success of the organization and its long-term survival. In doing so, leaders contribute to the competence of individuals and groups to manage complexity in their environment.

The Wallenda Factor

Shortly after Karl Wallenda fell to his death in 1978 (traversing a 75-foot high wire in downtown San Juan, Puerto Rico), his wife, also an aerialist, discussed that fateful San Juan walk, "perhaps his most dangerous." She recalled: "All Karl thought about for three straight months prior to it was falling. It was the first time he'd ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energies into not falling rather than walking the tightrope." Mrs. Wallenda added that her husband even went so far as to personally supervise the installation of the tightrope, making certain that the guide wires were secure, "something he had never even thought of doing before."

From what we learned from the interviews with successful leaders, it became increasingly clear that when Karl Wallenda poured his energies into not falling rather than walking the tightrope, he was virtually destined to fall.

We're now at the point where we can bring together the two elements of the management of self into a unified theory. Basically, both positive self-regard and the Wallenda factor have to do with the outcomes. In the case of self-regard, the basic question is: how competent am I? Do I have the "right" stuff? The Wallenda factor is primarily concerned with one's perception with the outcome of the event.

The management of self is critical. Without it, leaders may do more harm than good. Creative deployment of self makes leading a deeply personal business. It's positive self-regard. The meaning of this phrase comes from responses to this standard question: "What are your major strengths and weaknesses?" For the most part, leaders emphasize their strengths and tend to minimize their weaknesses. Which is not to say that they weren't aware of personal weaknesses but rather that they did not harp on them. Good leaders always emphasize the positive - their best and the organization's best.

The Myths of Leadership

1. Leadership is a rare skill. Nothing can be further from the truth. While great leaders may be rare, everyone has leadership potential. More important, people may be leaders in one organization and have quite ordinary roles in another. The truth is that leadership opportunities are plentiful and within reach of most people.
2. Leaders are born, not made. Don't believe it. The truth is that major capacities and competencies of leadership can be learned, and we are all educable, at least if the basic desire to learn is there. This is not to suggest that it is easy to be a leader. There is no simple formula, no rigorous science, no cookbook that leads inexorably to successful leadership. Instead, it is deeply human process, full of trial and error, victories and defeats, timing and happenstance, intuition and insight.
3. Leaders are charismatic. Some are, most aren't. Charisma is the result of effective leadership, not the other way around, and that those who are good at it are granted a certain amount of respect and even awe by their followers, which increases the bond of attraction between them.
4. Leadership exists only at the top of the organization. In fact, the larger the organization, the more leadership roles it is likely to have.
5. The leaders controls, directs, prods, manipulates. This is perhaps the most damaging myth of all. Leadership is not so much the exercise of power itself as the empowerment of energies to the organization behind an attractive goal. Leaders lead by pulling rather than pushing; by inspiring rather than ordering; by enabling people to use their own initiative and experiences rather than by denying or constraining their experiences and actions.

Once these myths are cleared away, the question becomes not one of how to become a leader, but rather how to improve one's effectiveness at leadership - how to "take charge" of the leadership in an organization.

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