Accepting Leadership Responsibility
Preparing Yourself to Lead Honestly, Humanely, and Effectively

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Many who enter management are ready and willing to accept the benefits of their positions, but not all are readily accepting of the full responsibilities of leadership. All too frequently, modern leadership appears self-serving, with the needs and desires of the leaders taking precedence over the needs of the followers and even the needs of the clients or customers. True leadership, however, should primarily benefit the followers rather than the leader. Leaders lead and followers follow for essentially the same reason, fulfillment of needs, so leaders and followers are fundamentally little different from each other. Every manager at every level has organizational superiors, so every leader is a follower as well. A true leader among managers is one who subordinates personal needs to the organization's needs, places employees well above self in importance, models appropriate behavior for employees, and functions as a facilitator in the employees' continuing efforts to get the necessary work done efficiently and effectively. Key words: delegation, followers, leader, leaders, leadership, manage, management, management responsibilities, managers, motivation, needs

Is leadership an art or a science? Are leaders born, or can they be made? We surely have no definitive answers to these frequently posed questions and no answers at all other than "Yes" to all parts of both questions. Yes, leadership can rightly be called an art; yes, leadership can justly be referred to as a science; yes, leaders are born, occurring naturally in society; yes, leaders are made, arising through appropriate education and development.

Most people probably have some capacity for leadership, although in some people leadership potential may be severely limited. The fundamental difference between the leader and the nonleader is often marked by no more than the extent to which an individual has succeeded in learning about leadership and putting what has been learned into practice.

Leading is similar to a great many other human activities in that possession of a talent for it can be extremely helpful, but it is not necessary to be extraordinarily talented to be successful. The average worker may not be a natural leader—and there are such people as natural leaders—able to run a large organization or persuade large numbers of people to willingly follow in some undertaking. Nevertheless, most persons in organizational life stand at least an average chance of being able to furnish capable leadership for a department or other work group.

Clearly, there are dramatic differences in perceptions of what characterizes an effective leader and how a leader should behave. We can find such differences embodied in the views of leadership put forth over the years by certain people who have either succeeded in leadership roles or have studied leadership and some of its practitioners' successes and failures.
For example, Henry Ford is credited for saying, “The question of who ought to be boss is like asking who ought to sing tenor in a quartet. Obviously, the man who can sing tenor.” Although Ford did not say how the man who should sing tenor became able to sing tenor, the clear implication is that leadership is a talent with which one may be born. We can perhaps argue that in most instances innate ability requires conscientious development, but one who accepts the Ford argument must essentially believe that leadership requires something special in the individual that may not reside in all people. Ford was saying, in effect, that leaders are born.

A different, and some will say overly simplistic, view was advanced by Robert Townsend in *Up the Organization*, originally published in 1970. He said, “How do you spot a leader? They come in all ages, shapes, sizes, and conditions. Some are poor administrators, some are not overly bright. One clue: since most people per se are mediocre, the true leader can be recognized because, somehow or other, his people consistently turn in superior performances.” Where this seems to grate with many is not in the implication that leadership results from something within the person without suggesting how it got there—that is, inborn or developed—but in the pronouncement that “most people are per se mediocre.” Townsend might better have referred to most people as “average” or, perhaps better yet, “ordinary.” However, his statement does rightly suggest that effective leaders can arise from the ranks of ordinary, everyday people.

John Seaman Garnes, writing considerably earlier than Townsend, said, “Real leaders are ordinary people with extraordinary determinations.” Moreover, Wendell Wilkie was quoted for saying, “Education is the mother of leadership.”

Building on the foregoing, we might then suggest that effective leaders may well be ordinary people, but they are probably ordinary people with a mission or drive—that “extraordinary determination”—and they do not take leadership ability for granted but rather cultivate it through education.

If the preceding paragraph perhaps describes the nature of true leadership, we can proceed to suggest that what remains for that leadership to be seen as appropriate and effective is a matter of focus. To once again quote Townsend, “True leadership must be for the benefit of the followers, not the enrichment of the leaders.” We need not go too far out of the way to point out that recent years’ behavior by numerous highly placed executives that the enrichment of the leaders has all too often been a top priority.

Many people express eagerness to attain leadership positions. Readily accepted are the inflated salaries and benefits packages and other perquisites of executive management, but not so readily accepted are the core responsibilities of leadership. Some in leadership positions will perhaps reject this contention, but recent history contradicts them. The failed executive who “bails out” with a multimillion-dollar severance package and the top manager who exercises multimillion-dollar stock options while the employees see their retirement investments shrivel to nothing have both abrogated the responsibilities of leadership.

Whether chief executive officer or first-line supervisor, effective leadership begins with acceptance of leadership’s responsibilities. Regardless of the level of the leadership position under consideration, whether first-line supervisor or chief executive officer, many, perhaps most, of individuals ascending to leadership are focused more strongly on the rewards and perquisites of the position rather than the responsibilities.

**ALWAYS DIFFICULT OR SOMETIMES EASY?**

It can at times be disarmingly easy to lead a group of people in pursuit of an objective, in fact so easy that one might wonder if the leader is even needed. At other times, it can be extremely difficult to very nearly impossible to lead a group of people in pursuit of an objective, so much so that it seems no one would be capable of the task. What makes the difference? The differences lie in the extent to
which leader and followers are in tune with each other concerning what is sought and how it is to be achieved.

If leader and followers are in complete agreement as to their objectives—that is, all parties involved are equally dedicated to achieving the same results by generally the same means—leading the group can be easy. The group may even be said to be self-directed, with the titular “leader” an integral member of the team. However, if the followers are in disagreement with or resistant to the direction they are expected to go, leading the group can, in the extreme, become the stuff nightmares are made of. Consider the resistance often encountered when it is necessary or desirable to introduce significant change. As Niccolo Machiavelli proclaimed several centuries ago, “There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.”

Much of the basis of successful leadership would seem, then, to depend on individual motivation, specifically on the extent to which the leader’s motivations are equivalent to or consistent with the motivations of the followers. Matching motivations and the complete acceptance of leadership’s responsibilities are key to the individual manager’s success as a leader.

**MOTIVATION: LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS**

Anyone who becomes a member of any group does so to fulfill certain needs. This is as true of families, clubs, social groups, and various kinds of teams as it is of work groups, but this discussion will be limited to consideration of work groups. An individual becomes part of a work group to seek fulfillment of needs. Some of these needs can be as fundamental as the need for an income with which to secure the perceived necessities of life. However, an individual may also be seeking fulfillment of social needs, the need to belong, and certain higher-order needs such as the need to contribute or the need to achieve. Although any given person’s mix of needs may be anything from slightly to vastly different, an individual becomes a member of a group to seek need fulfillment.

**Mixed motivations: conflicting reasons for seeking leadership positions**

Close examination of a number of the reasons why many people seek leadership positions can be somewhat unsettling. We know, of course, that if we were to ask a number of people why they want to be leaders, we are going to hear the likes of “I want the challenge,” “I only want to serve,” or “I want to make things better,” much like politicians say when running for election. However, would all of these same people still want to help or serve if that was all there was to it? If there were not also money and status and prominence and perhaps power to be had?

This may strike one as a somewhat cynical view of leadership. Nevertheless, when we think seriously of all of the various reasons one might give for seeking a leadership position, it is possible to develop a list of several dozen reasons. In fact, in a brainstorming session held for that purpose, a management development discussion group generated a list of nearly 60 possible reasons ranging from the strictly personal (e.g., “to make more money”) to the purely altruistic (e.g., “to be of service to others”). There were some reasons that overlapped to some extent, but even weeding out the obvious duplicates still left more than 50 possible reasons for seeking leadership positions.

Initial examination suggested that the list included many more personal reasons than altruistic reasons, so the next step consisted of sorting the reasons into 2 groups—the personal (or inclined in that direction) versus the altruistic (or at least other-directed) reasons. The focus of the personal reasons obviously was “me, my, and mine” all the way; the focus of the altruistically inclined reasons was “we, you, and they.”

It quickly became evident that the personally oriented reasons for seeking leadership were adding up considerably faster than those
that were altruistic in nature. In fact, even after several prunings to eliminate more shades of overlap, the personal reasons for seeking leadership outnumbered the altruistic reasons by slightly more than 5 to 1. From this admittedly nonscientific exercise, the group concluded that (1) people who actively seek leadership positions probably do so for a mixed bag of reasons and (2) it is highly likely that in most such people the personal reasons for doing so are predominant.

We cannot argue too successfully against this notion of personal reasons driving people to seek leadership positions. Ask the individual who is seeking to become a supervisor or manager why this kind of position is sought and you will usually hear responses about desiring challenge, more interesting work, chance to make a contribution, or opportunity to work with people. Although these are noble sounding reasons of the kind we would hope to hear, these reasons can also be quite personal. Even the chance to make a contribution can be considered personal when it represents a psychological need, something the individual requires to feel good about self. Moreover, although reasons of this order will be the kind stated in the interview process, usually even stronger than these are the true drivers that move someone to seek a leadership position. However, you can be fairly certain that the candidate for a leadership position will never answer by saying: “I am seeking this job so I can earn more money, secure better benefits for me and my family, and gain a measure of status.”

Finding leaders

Most of the time we do not find leaders; rather, they find us. We make it clear that we are looking for a leader or leaders, and those who wish to become leaders respond to the solicitation. The military wants officers, so applicants are sought for the service academies or potential candidates are urged to apply to officer candidate schools. In the corporate world, we run advertisements, recruit on college campuses, and pay stiff fees to management search firms or we select promising performers and elevate them from the ranks. In addition, in what is quite likely the most complex leader identification process of all, that of nomination to candidacy and election to public office, would-be officeholders parade before the public with all the subtlety of male peacocks at mating time begging to be chosen.

In most—but assuredly not all—of the foregoing instances, the driving forces that bring the new leader into the leadership position are largely personal. There can be some clear exceptions with promising performers who are elevated from the ranks, especially if this occurs not in response to a posting or solicitation but strictly on higher management’s initiation. For the most part, however, it is personal, frequently self-centered, reasons that cause people to seek leadership positions.

The second-best prevail

Lao Tzu (or Lao Tse or perhaps Lao Tse, depending on where one sees the name written) was an oriental philosopher who lived in the 6th century B.C. and who is generally considered the founder of the naturalistic philosophy known as Taoism. The Lao Tzu teachings touched on issues of leadership and leaders as well as a great many other topics. To paraphrase a portion of his commentary on leadership: As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear, and the next, the people hate. When the best leader’s work is done, the people say, ‘We did it ourselves.’

Consider: The next best, the people honor and praise.

Is that not what we ordinarily do concerning leaders who we consider to be successful? We build statues of military heroes and we honor presidents by placing their images on money and postage stamps, building beautiful monuments to honor them and their contributions, and carving their likenesses into mountains. These are the “next best” leaders. However, where are the best leaders, the ones for whom we “do not notice their existence?”
The best potential leaders: who and from where?

Better than second-best

It is clear that society obtains a great many of the second-best leaders. Some of these can be fairly effective, but it is occasionally evident, especially in the presence of conflict between personal desires and the needs of those served, that the supposed drive to serve is actually powered by individual needs. We do occasionally get the best or near-best, those few who can consciously seek leadership and yet hold personal needs and drives always subordinate to the requirements of the job. This subordinating of personal concerns is perhaps most likely to prevail with leaders whose strongest drives include a great fondness for the duties of the job. That is, if they enjoy what they do, and what they do is exactly what the organization's objectives require them to do, they could be as effective as the best of leaders.

Some of the best leaders surface during times of stress, stepping into difficult situations and taking over and filling urgent needs. These potential leaders can take over in emergencies when guidance is needed and there is apparently no one in charge. We have seen dozens of perfect examples of such in war movies in which a unit's leader is incapacitated and someone from the ranks must fill the void and take over running the unit. We have doubtless heard of the "battlefield commission" where someone has successfully risen from the ranks under combat circumstances. Some of the best leaders, then, will step forward to deal with a specific problem or accomplish a specific objective simply because it must be done but no one is there to do it.

A relative few of the best leaders are recognized by higher management and asked to assume leadership positions. These leaders are more or less "drafted" because they were not actively seeking leadership. (They can, of course, refuse promotion, but relatively few do so once asked.) Of course, a great many not-so-effective leaders are elevated in the same manner, a practice that should usually serve to remind us that the best workers, or, in the case of many healthcare functions, the best clinicians or technicians, do not necessarily make the best managers.

It is likely that a great many of the best potential leaders, perhaps even a majority, forever remain unknown and untapped, buried in the general population. These potential leaders may possess all or most of the qualifications for selfless leadership and yet lack the desire to seek leadership. When we see their talents used, if at all, it is usually when one steps forward to fill a sudden void or solve a specific problem then fades back into the ranks.

We are suggesting, of course, that a great deal of leadership talent will forever remain unused, forever buried in the population, possessed by those who never seek leadership and are never called on or otherwise discovered. Rarely are the very best potential leaders also subject to the drives that could cause them to actively pursue leadership positions.

And even the best can change

Even some of the best or near-best leaders can change once having spent sufficient time in leadership to become carried away by the perks of the position, whether power, money, celebrity, or whatever. Some who possess and exercise these advantages are inevitably changed by them to an extent that having and using these becomes an objective in itself. As Machiavelli is supposed to have said, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Some leaders undoubtedly do go off on "power trips," clearly enjoying having their own way and having subordinates constantly defer to them. More likely, however, or at least more in evidence, are the lesser but sometimes highly visible effects of the markings of image and status. Some leaders, as is clearly evident in many organizations, take full advantage of their positions in using perks such as private parking spaces (the closer to the entrance, the greater the status), private wash rooms, and executive lunch rooms and
in surrounding themselves with supposed image enhancers like awards, citations, diplomas, and photographs taken with the great or near-great.

Some leaders are sufficiently aware of negative perceptions inspired by the all-too-visible perks of leadership to deliberately avoid overt actions that could lead employees to conclude that the leader is setting himself or herself apart from—and above—others. However, no matter how well-meaning the leader may be, this sometimes self-conscious, just-one-of-the-gang behavior can come across as a false egalitarianism that fools no one.

The leader who is taken in at all by the perks of the position is usually the leader who is focused on the job to the exclusion of thoughts of image or status. The one who is focused on self will usually give in to the perks and flaunt them to the fullest. The leader who is focused on the position will be conscious of appearances and perhaps slide into false egalitarianism. However, the leader who remains focused on the task will remain unaffected.

The true test of leadership may lie in the very act of leading. He or she who remains unchanged by the lure of leadership’s advantages and rewards may well be among the best of the best.

**In pursuit of need satisfaction**

Anyone who belongs to any group, whether a structured formal organization or an unstructured collection of people, belongs for one or a number of reasons. The reasons for belonging relate in one way or another to the prospect of personally getting something from membership. The employee, for example, works for a combination of reasons high among which are those that have to do with earning a living and perhaps pursuing a career. That is, the employee is likely to be seeking income, benefits, and reasonable job security, and perhaps rewarding and interesting work experiences as well, from his or her membership in the work organization. That same person may belong to any number of other gatherings of people—church, bowling league, bridge club, or garden club, to name but a few possibilities—and in each instance does so for the purpose of obtaining something for the membership.

What we are doing in our employment and in our memberships of all kinds is attempting to fulfill particular wants or desires. That is, we are attempting to satisfy needs. In this context, needs should be given the broadest possible interpretation. We may say with a great deal of certainty that we do not absolutely “need” anything more than air, water, food, and protection. In what motivates people, however, a need is any force or attraction or desire that they feel driven to attain.

**Revisiting Maslow**

In his well-known “need hierarchy,” A.H. Maslow described the basic human needs as follows:

- Physiological needs. These represent the fundamentals required to sustain life, such as food and shelter.
- Safety needs. These include our need to feel reasonably free from harm and reasonable free from economic deprivation (as in a sense of job security).
- Love needs. These include our need to be liked and the need to be accepted as part of a group or groups; a sense of belonging.
- Esteem needs. At this level, we experience needs for recognition, appreciation, and approval.
- Self-actualization. The highest-order need; this involves the reach for complete personal fulfillment. As Maslow described it, this need represents “a pressure toward unity of personality, toward spontaneous expressiveness—toward being creative, toward being good, and a lot else.”

To render the Maslow need hierarchy yet simpler, we can rearrange the foregoing 5 levels of needs into 3 as follows:

- Physiological needs—merging the safety needs of the Maslow second level with the basic life-sustaining needs of the first level.
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- Sociological needs—renaming the Maslow love needs to reflect the needs for belonging and the need for relationships with others.
- Psychological needs—combining the Maslow fourth and highest levels, both of which represent needs of the psyche.

What employees—all employees, at all levels—want

As already suggested, people want the organizations they work for to supply them with a number of things. We cannot list these in any particular order; what is important to one person may matter very little to another. Generally, however, we will find that the following list encompasses most of what employees expect from their employers:

- capable leadership that can be respected and admired;
- decent working conditions—surroundings that promote physical well-being;
- acceptance as a member of a group;
- recognition as an individual or partner rather than simply a servant of the “system”;
- fair treatment relative to that received by others;
- a reasonable degree of job security;
- knowledge of the results of individual efforts;
- knowledge of the organization’s rules, policies, and regulations;
- recognition for special effort or good performance;
- assurance that all others are doing their share of the work;
- fair monetary compensation.

Without a great deal of effort, it is possible to rearrange these dozen “wants” into 3 groups representing the desired satisfaction of physiological, sociological, and psychological needs. Fitting best under “physiological” are fair monetary compensation, working conditions, and job security. “Sociological” encompasses a few more, specifically acceptance as a member of a group, recognition as an individual or partner, knowledge of the organization’s policies, etc., respect for individual beliefs, capable leadership, and shades of some others (fair treatment, assurance that others are doing their share of the work). The remainder, plus shades of several mentioned under sociological, falls under “psychological,” especially recognition for special effort or good performance and knowledge of the results of individual efforts.

All employees at all levels want essentially the same things from their work. There are differences among people, however, sometimes negligible, sometimes significant, and sometimes overpowering, regarding who is driven more or less strongly by what.

It is actually the same collection of needs that drive leader and followers alike, but it is a different mix in that varying needs provide different levels of drive in different people. However, we can truthfully and completely correctly say that in the last analysis “leaders lead and followers follow for the same reason—to obtain need satisfaction.”

Leadership patterns and leaders’ needs

From their behavior, one can infer a great many of the needs that drive leaders to perform as they do. There can, of course, be as many different leadership “styles” in an organization as there are leaders, but a brief look at the classic leadership patterns will allow us to associate certain kinds of leadership behavior with certain likely drives. Consider these leadership patterns in order from most autocratic to most democratic.

Exploitative autocracy

The exploitative autocrat is a leader who leads by dictate. The autocrat rules; it is the leader’s way or, more often than not, no way at all. Input from subordinates is neither solicited nor welcomed. Further, this kind of leader’s style is clearly self-serving to the extent of exploiting the followers for personal satisfaction and enrichment. The exploitative autocrat is dictatorial and usually extremely forceful and goal directed. To the exploitative autocrat, subordinates are a readily expendable commodity to be consumed in the process of obtaining what the leader is seeking.

Think of exploitative autocracy as representative of a style or pattern we might refer to
as the “Atilla the Hun” school of management. It is characterized by total leader domination.

The autocratic leader, whether exploitative or otherwise, is usually directed by strong psychological needs. The autocrat may seem to be pursuing wealth, power, territory, prominence, or whatever, when in fact the driving forces are not the desire for these things and what they can bring (e.g., what money can buy) but are rather the ego gratification inherent in the pursuit and accomplishment of goals. To again mention money, the exploitative autocrat will not be driven by the appeal of having and spending wealth but by the process of acquiring wealth.

**Benevolent autocracy**

As this label suggests, the benevolent autocrat is kindly. Make no mistake, however; the benevolent autocrat can be fully as insistent on his or her own way as the exploitative autocrat—and can be nearly as punishing as the exploitative leader with followers who do not willingly comply.

In many ways, the benevolent autocrat can actually be more troublesome than the exploitative autocrat. With an exploitative leader, you can usually recognize what you are dealing with; this leader’s style makes it plain that he or she is looking out for number 1 exclusively. This leaves the followers with a fairly clear choice; if their own needs are being met incidental to the leader’s needs, they can stay. Alternatively, if their needs are not being met, perhaps they can leave (we are unable to say here whether the Atilla troops had any choice about serving). With the exploitative autocrat, what you see is usually what you get.

Not so, however, with the benevolent autocrat. The benevolent autocrat is frequently driven by what he or she believes is for the good of the followers. Without benefit of input from the followers, the benevolent autocrat, more often than not with an honest regard for the well-being of the followers, will decide what is best for the followers and give them no choice but to follow the path the leader has selected. A significant part of the benevolent autocrat’s ego gratification comes from seemingly doing good for the followers but doing so only in the way the leader believes is right.

Reactions to this leadership style vary widely. Some people love it; perhaps all they need do is what they are told to do, and the leader will strive to ensure their job security, their economic well-being, and their future. Others, however, are unable to tolerate an autocratic leadership style for even a short time. Why the differences? Again, needs. People remain different one to the next.

Think of benevolent autocracy as representative of a style or pattern we might refer to as the “Father-Knows-Best” school of management. It is characterized by nearly total leader domination but including some consideration of the followers in the form of what the leader has decided is “good for them.”

**Bureaucracy**

The primary focus of the bureaucratic leader appears to be the maintenance and preservation of “the system.” It is a rule-bound leadership pattern that serves procedures and processes at the expense of people. If the elements of the system are fully appropriate to a given situation and are implemented properly, a person or persons may be well served. However, if the fit is not complete, it is the person who must give way rather than the system. In the bureaucracy, there must be a rule or procedure for everything. When an occasion arises for which no proscription exists, service can halt while a process is devised.

In all probability, the bureaucratic leader is acting out of a need for order, for predictability, for a sense of sameness from event to event. The pure bureaucratic leader may also be driven by a strong need for obedience (of both leaders and followers). A bureaucracy may be characterized by a considerable amount of leader domination, perhaps 50% or more, with the remaining emphasis on “the system.”

**Consultation**

Consultative leadership is exhibited when the leader remains open to input from the followers but, through pronouncement, attitude,
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or practice, retains full decision-making authority. In many instances, consultative leadership is appropriate (as even autocratic leadership of the benevolent kind can occasionally be appropriate), but often consultative leadership is practiced under a participative label. Some leaders claim they are open to participation, but in practice, they are “open” only as long as the employees come up with the same decisions they would have made themselves.

The consultative leader is frequently a leader with autocratic tendencies who, nevertheless, recognizes, or at least pays verbal tribute to, the generally accepted desirability of obtaining employee input. However, this leader appears to be acting out of a strong need for a feeling of absolute control. Consultative leadership is characterized by a significant amount of leader domination and considerable emphasis on the leader’s way of doing things. However, in soliciting employee input at all, consultative leadership demonstrates a style that is beginning to “open up” to people.

Participation

Full participative leadership exists when plans are formulated or decisions are made by all of the group’s members as a team. The leader is, of course, a key member of the team, providing advice, information, resources, and assistance in any way possible. However, the truly participative leader has made an advance commitment to accept the outcome of the group process.

The participative leader, although subject to a mix of needs that is likely as complex as any other employee’s, is driven largely by the desire to get things done. As long as the things getting done are the “right” things—that is, as long as the organization’s objectives and priorities are being addressed—need fulfillment for leader, followers, and the organization itself will occur simultaneously.

Still not so far apart

Leaders lead for the same reason that followers follow—to fulfill certain needs. Far too many leaders make the fundamental mistake of behaving as though the followers’ needs and drives are vastly different from their own. Probably the only substantive way in which a leader differs from the others in the group is in the emphasis on certain needs relative to others. A follower follows to obtain need satisfaction; a leader leads to obtain need satisfaction.

LEADING A WORK GROUP: THE PRACTICAL SIDE

A department manager’s leadership responsibilities may be fulfilled in a number of ways. The leader at any organizational level is also a follower of the leader at the next highest level. No manager is exempted from answering to a superior, even the chief executive officer must be responsive to a board of directors or trustees (because a board is involved, one can say that the chief executive officer has multiple superiors). Keeping in mind that leaders lead and followers follow for similar reasons, and because a manager is both leader and follower, it makes sense for the department manager to deal with the department’s employees in the manner in which he or she would wish to be dealt with by higher management. To that end, a number of actions or practices are suggested as means toward the fulfillment of one’s leadership responsibilities.

Don’t tell them, show them

Any number of newly appointed or incoming managers have made the mistake of trying to tell the employees what kind of leader they intend to be. We have heard such declarations time and again: “You’ll find I am a shirt-sleeves manager, on the floors where the action is”; “I believe in employee participation, so I’ll welcome your input”; and probably the absolute classic in this vein, “My door is always open.” Such statements often create employee expectations, but these are expectations that are doomed to contradiction. The manager gets busy addressing
demands from higher up and is seen less and less "on the floors"; because of time pressures or the freedom to do so, much employee input never gets through to the manager; and because the manager has so much to do and is under so much pressure, the door is not always open and employees have to resort to making appointments and waiting their turn.

The manager who enters a new position and immediately begins describing his or her management style and intentions can be guaranteed that expectations will arise and will soon be contradicted by perceived behavior. Rather than set one's self up for such perceptions, better to demonstrate one's leadership style through thoughtful, well-considered actions. No need to say it; simply do it.

**Be mindful of a single manager's influence**

The manager of a group, especially a first-line manager supervising a number of non-managerial personnel, is in all likelihood the single member of the management structure that the employees in the group know best. It is not unusual for this manager to be the only member of management with whom the individual employee has a speaking relationship.

The employees in the group depend on the manager for a great deal—work instructions, assistance and guidance, interpretation of policies, information about the organization at large, and much more. If the manager seems to be unreachable, too busy for the employees and generally cold, distant, and uncommunicative, and if employees cannot get their questions answered or their concerns addressed, the employees will likely hold an unfavorable view of the manager. And because this manager is the primary representative of the management hierarchy for these employees, as the employees see the manager so too are they likely to see the entire organization. The manager who appears not to care can nurture in a number of employees the belief that the organization does not care. In brief, as the employees see the manager so too are they likely to see the organization. This goes as well for the leader's attitude; the attitude projected by the leader can affect the entire group.

For good or ill, a single manager's influence can be significant.

**Remain visible and available**

A manager should, of course, be encouraging employees to solve their own problems and guide them in learning how to do so. Nevertheless, the manager should be fairly visible around the department much of the time and should be perceived as available to employees when needed. A considerable part of the effect of visibility and availability is psychological; employees draw a measure of comfort from the knowledge that the manager is there if needed. Visibility and availability also tells the employees that the manager cares about them and their work and problems. On the other hand, if the employees rarely see the manager and perceive that they cannot access the manager when there is an absolute need to do so, the resulting perception will be that the manager cares little for them and their concerns.

Employees can tell a great deal about a manager by the extent to which he or she is visible and available. Managers are subject to demand from both below and above, and is perhaps understandable that a manager may spend considerable time "facing upward" in the hierarchy toward higher management. After all, it is from higher management that the department manager receives promotions and praise and other rewards. However, the manager who is perceived as "facing upward" most of the time is likely to be seen as ignoring the department and its employees.

"Facing downward" is, of course, the appropriate orientation for the department manager most of the time, downward toward one's own employees and one's own department and its patients and clients. The manager who is predominantly "facing upward" is placing responsibility to self above responsibility to employees and customers.
Practice proper delegation

As an essential management process, delegation receives far more lip service than conscientious practice. Hardly a manager exists who would not say that he or she practices delegation. Unfortunately, however, what so many see as delegation is no more than the assignment of work to a subordinate. The fact of the matter is that most first-line managers do not delegate significantly beyond simple organizational delegation; that is, assigning people to jobs per job descriptions and helping them learn their jobs.

As sometimes happens with the labels for various management techniques or processes, over a period during which a process is misused, underused, or abused, its label becomes tarnished to some extent. This happened to delegation; the term was thrown about so often for so many years while true delegation was not occurring or was only partly occurring, that the term developed a connotation implying inadequacy or incompleteness.

When a label becomes tarnished, users (and especially the writers of management literature) look for something cleaner sounding to replace it. In the case of delegation, the replacement applied in many instances has been "empowerment." In reality, empowerment is neither more nor less than delegation done properly, but for so long so much delegation was done incompletely or improperly that "delegation" acquired its present tarnish. Moreover, most will doubtless concede that "empowerment" seems to carry a far more favorable connotation than "delegation."

Word play aside, however, it is to the department manager's advantage to understand true delegation and know why and how it is accomplished. We could now insert a virtual textbook on delegation, which, of course, would be inconsistent with the intent of a single article. Suffice to say that proper delegation should be a topic of serious study for every first-line manager. A great many tasks come the way of the first-line manager in a healthcare organization, many of which do not require the application of management authority. Many of these tasks are natural candidates for delegation.

The old adage, "If you want something done well, do it yourself," is a fallacy as far as management is concerned. One person can do only so much and continue to do things well. As the work continues to roll in and accumulate, many a manager will find that he or she must learn to delegate effectively or run the risk of becoming a workaholic struggling to keep up but always falling farther behind.

A number of the first-line manager's responsibilities to self, employees, clients, and organization are fulfilled via proper delegation.

Use deadlines and follow-up

Closely related to delegation—in fact, an integral part of delegation but also relevant to simple, everyday assignments—is the consistent use of deadlines and follow-up. The weakest sorts of assignments, including unfortunately many assignments made off-handedly, are those the likes of "Sometime when you have a minute, take care of this," "How about doing this in your spare time?" or "This looks like it should be yours; no rush, just whenever you can."

The use of deadlines and follow-up is a two-part process, which, if incorporated as a habit, can dramatically enhance a manager's effectiveness. The first part: Any task, even the small, not-immediately-important, no-rush task, deserves a specific deadline. Any task at all that is worth assigning is worth a specific deadline. Moreover, the second (and critical) part: Never allow a deadline to pass unanswered without following up.

The first change to make is getting over the practice of making vague or open-ended assignments like the examples cited above. Such assignments are not fair; there is surely no specific time frame associated with "when you have a minute" or other such nonspecific directions, so the employee is left to guess when. Tomorrow? Next week? In addition, the employee is placed in a position of deciding whether the task must be done at all. Often, such "assignments" are never followed
up; the assigning manager seemingly forgets what has been assigned.

Using deadlines and follow-up may require a bit of self-discipline in the early stages, but faithfully applied—and with the use of calendar notes indicating follow-up times—the process becomes habit. Assigning the deadlines is usually the easy part; many managers do it, but many managers also neglect the follow-up. When the follow-up is neglected, the employees quickly learn that these assignments are not really serious and some tend to let them slide regardless of a supposed “deadline.” However, using specific—and always reasonable—deadlines and faithfully following up every time, one’s employees will soon get the message that each assignment is serious and that it is in their best interest to meet your deadline because they know that otherwise you will be asking for the results at that time.

**Lead to serve, not to be served**

The members of a group ordinarily accept direction of their activities because doing so is more effective in getting things done than having everyone go their own way. In pursuing activities that cannot be successfully undertaken by a single person, a team will accept the direction established by the leader as the most effective way of achieving need satisfaction. Because the leader is important to the followers’ need satisfaction, however, too many leaders make the mistake of believing themselves more important than the followers. Some come to believe that they must be better and more important than others because they are paid more than the followers. The pay, however, is a measure of responsibility and perhaps difficulty; it is certainly not a measure of importance. In healthcare especially, it can perhaps justifiably be claimed that the most important people are those who are delivering the hands-on patient care.

In the work organization, the leader is there to run interference for the staff, to provide guidance, remove obstacles, provide resources, and encourage growth, and in general to enable the staff to get their work done as efficiently as possible. The leader is primarily a servant of the staff. However, far too many people in responsible management positions seem to have turned this notion around in that their behavior says they consider the staff to be their servants.

The leader who is chronically late for meetings that he or she has scheduled is telling the staff they are of lesser importance. The leader who will make or take a telephone call, entertain a nonurgent interruption, or allow some other diversion during a one-on-one meeting is saying behaviorally: “I am the boss; it is okay for me to do these things because I am more important than you and surely my time is more valuable than yours.”

Similarly, the leader who delegates speedily, partially, or unclearly and allows an employee to muddle through without clear guidance only later to say “That is not what I meant—do it again” is behaviorally proclaiming his or her greater importance.

Such leaders as those just described are driven by strong needs for stature or feelings of importance. Along with those who visibly display leadership’s perks or who continually remind other of their elevated status, such leaders strive to set themselves apart from—and over and above and decidedly better than—others. However, a truly good leader sets himself or herself above others in just one dimension: bearing responsibility.

Lead to serve, not to be served. It is unfortunate indeed that in the present time the serving character of true leadership is so very little in evidence. We are instead living and working in an era in which a significant percentage of visible “leadership” is clearly self-serving. One can conclude nothing otherwise, considering the many “leaders” who become multimillionaires at the expense of customers, employees, and stockholders.

**WHAT REALLY DEFINES A LEADER?**

What characteristics define a leader? What is it an individual must possess to be assured of success as a leader? We cannot with any certainty create even a short list of multiple
qualities or characteristics that absolutely define a successful leader. Certainly, it is possible to generate long lists of “leadership characteristics” that we believe successful leaders should exhibit, but for every so-called leadership characteristic, it is possible to list numerous leaders who succeeded although lacking that characteristic. In the long run, there is but one characteristic or condition that must be present for a leader to succeed, and that is the acceptance of the followers. Because the function of the leader is to move the group in the direction of need satisfaction, as long as this is being done to the group members’ satisfaction, that leader is successful. This is true whether the leader is essentially self-serving or is genuinely driven by concern for others.

MORE WORD PLAY

There is a game of sorts that enjoys widespread use in the practice of management, in the literature of management, in management education, and especially in advertising for seminars, conferences, and training materials. The game involves regularly replacing a word that supposedly carries a somewhat negative connotation (think “delegation”) with a more agreeable, more acceptable term (think “empowerment”).

The most prevalent form this game assigns is a generally unsatisfactory connotation to “management” in comparison with a much more positive connotation for “leadership.” As one particular piece of educational material advertising expressed it: “Be a leader, not just another manager.”

In any dictionary, “leadership” and “management” are in fact synonyms for each other. The point is that neither word is by itself particularly more appropriate than the other. There are qualitative degrees of leadership as there are of management, and neither word is especially meaningful unless modified by other words (such as good, effective, strong, weak, ineffectual, or whatever). A successful manager is a successful leader; a weak manager is a weak leader.

PERFORMING MANAGEMENT’S ESSENTIAL TASK

One more time: the same but different

It has already been established that the leader leads for the same reason that the followers follow—for need satisfaction. The key differences, of course, lie in the specific needs for which satisfaction is sought.

The essential task of management is to arrange conditions, methods and procedures, and material, human, and financial resources so that people can fulfill their own goals—that is, satisfy their own needs—by focusing their own efforts on the attainment of departmental and organizational objectives. In addition, the leader’s needs or drives must be consistent with the organization’s needs if there is to be mutual need satisfaction.

A leader who is genuinely motivated to get things done will usually move the followers in his or her intended direction. However, this movement can be for good or for ill depending on whether it is the right things that are getting done, so it is always essential that the leader’s goals are supportive of the organization’s goals.

It is not always easy to adjust one’s goals and intentionally emphasize different needs as conditions change. However, the healthcare environment is becoming increasingly more competitive, and leadership in a competitive environment faces continuous change and the need for continuous improvement. An organization’s competitive edge frequently comes from innovation, and innovation is enhanced when incorporated into the organization’s goals or at least allowed to alter the path along which the goals are pursued.

It is when essential adjustments in organizational goals occur that leaders are likely to be differentiated from each other by their behavior. The best leaders will be able to smoothly adjust their goals to support the organization’s revised goals. This is so because their strongest drives involve the need to move their followers toward getting the job done. Lesser leaders will frequently be evident by their inability to adjust to the pursuit
of revised organizational goals. At times, their behavior may look much like resistance to change. Despite this appearance, however, what looks like resistance can be owing to their tendency to continue pursuing other goals. It is likely that these leaders cannot readily make the needed adjustments because they continue to be driven primarily by needs that are largely self-serving.

LEADERSHIP'S RESPONSIBILITIES

We could no doubt develop a lengthy list of specific responsibilities applicable to one in the position of a first-line manager. Generalizing, however, the manager's leadership responsibilities can be encapsulated in a few summary statements. The manager must:

- accept that he or she remains responsible for the actions of the group and the results of those actions;
- place responsibility to employees, organization, and clients clearly above responsibility to self;
- support the goals of the organization, subordinating his or her personal needs or desires to the requirements of the job;
- serve as a model of behavior for employees, always mindful of the importance of visibility and availability and the influence a single manager can project;
- function as a teacher and mentor for employees, actively helping employees grow in knowledge and capability;
- function as a true facilitator for the group, clearing obstacles and providing assistance and encouragement so that employees can achieve the best possible results;
- be always mindful of the serving character of true leadership.

AND THERE THEY GO—

A small office-wall decoration that has popped up now and again over the years reads: "There they go, and I must hasten to catch up with them—for I am their leader."

Amusing, perhaps, but we can infer from this that a department consisting of self-starting employees who know what they are doing and where they are going could be much to be desired by the leader. Ordinarily, the only way a group gets sufficiently effective that it can run for prolonged periods without the leader is through the team-building efforts of the leader. As Lao Tzu is supposed to have said: "When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"

Lao Tzu is also credited with saying: "To lead the people, walk behind them." The leader whose drives involve the need to get the right job done the right way can indeed walk behind the group once it is established as a properly functioning team, without even having to hasten to catch up.

REFERENCE
