

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Maintaining Balance Between Leading and Managing

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It's increasingly common for companies to refer to everyone in management as a leader — whether they genuinely function as leaders or not. In our [last issue](#) we looked at this trend and outlined a three-point litmus test to determine whether someone is truly a leader or merely a rechristened manager.

As we noted in that issue, we cannot fully separate leadership and management. Truly great leadership always includes a certain element of solid management. But from my experience and observation, it's a relatively easy matter for the management task to consume the leadership task. That is, we end up spending so much time on management that we no longer act as leaders.

The "Gotta Know" Test

So how do we avoid this pitfall? How do we keep from subverting the leadership task by spending too much time on the management task? And similarly, how do we keep from subverting the leadership task by spending too much time on the *wrong* management tasks?

The answer, obviously, is to maintain the proper balance between time given to management and time given to leadership. For me, finding that balance begins with this question: "How much do I feel compelled to be 'in the know' about everything that happens in my organization?"

The more I feel a need to be 'in the know' the more likely I am to skew my energy too heavily toward management. I will be spending too much time with my fingers in the pie. I will slowly gravitate from being a leader, because my focus is on management.

At lower levels of leadership it may be possible to lead well while also staying fully versed on what's happening below you. But the higher we climb on the leadership ladder, the less time we have to stay fully informed. This happens in part because our responsibility is so much broader that expanded duties simply take more time.

But there are also other contributing factors. Most of them relate to three decision-making realities that change as we move higher in leadership.

Second, this longer time horizon means greater ambiguity in the data on which we base decisions. We must often rely as much on forecasts and estimates as on solid data, which adds to the difficulty of confident decision-making.

And third, our decisions have far greater collateral impact on people and corporate processes. We must develop a keen instinct for anticipating this impact and factoring it into our decisions.

The Leader's Management Priorities

All three of these changes greatly reduce the amount of time we have to be "fully up to date" on the details within the organization we head. Learning to feel comfortable without being fully "in the know" is the most difficult stretch for many leaders aspiring to senior executive positions. I work regularly with executives who are struggling with this very challenge. Here's what I tell them.

To begin with, your management energy should center almost entirely on three concerns:

1. Having the right processes in place.
2. Having the right controls on the processes.
3. Having the right people in charge of the controls.

Once you satisfy these three criteria, you can trust your organization to do the right thing and to do it consistently. Trust is the key. An obsessive need to be "in the know" usually points to deep-seated distrust. When we can trust the processes, the controls, and the people responsible for those controls, we can be at ease, even if we are not completely "in the know."

Which then leads to a corollary. When things go wrong, our management duty as leaders is not to fix the problem. If we have the right people in place, they have the know-how to fix the problem.

No, our task is to determine where the breakdown occurred. Was it a breakdown in one or more processes? Was it a breakdown in control? Or was there a miscue on the part of those who manage the controls? These should be our primary management concerns as leaders.

And again, once we have determined the nature of the breakdown, it's best if we let our people design and implement the fix. There are exceptions to this rule, to be sure, particularly where the fix entails personnel changes. But to the degree that we get drawn into fixing problems that others can handle, we are sacrificing precious time we need for the leadership task.

Reviewing the "To-Do" List

Our first priority, then, is to put the proper processes, controls, and people in place. The second is to "stay out of the way." A massive list of "to do's" is often an indicator that we are becoming a bottle neck. When my to-do list starts mushrooming, I have to ask whether I'm injecting myself too deeply into the process. It's easy to do.

And it often happens insidiously, incrementally, over time. It may begin innocently enough with the identification of a problem and the guidance we give for overcoming it. The guidance should build around desired outcomes, not instruction on how to fix the

problem. Too much "how-to" guidance is a step toward injecting ourselves into the process.

But another subtle trap is lurking at this point. Once we empower our people to find solutions to a problem, it's almost natural to say, "Just keep me informed." As leaders, of course, we need to be informed on the progress toward resolving problems in processes, controls, or interpersonal relationships.

But from "keep me informed" we typically move next to "run your solution by me before you put it in place," which easily turns into "be sure I sign off on the key steps before you implement them." Little by little, with the best of intentions, and always under the guise of having "empowered my people" to solve problems, we put ourselves in the middle of the process.

Sometimes, when the problem is considerably complex, when the solutions stretch our people to the outer limits of their experience or competence, or when the economic or political consequences are extremely high, we need to have "sign-off" as leaders. But when "my sign-off" becomes a routine part of a process, "my sign-off" is soon likely to be routine in multiple processes. I'm on the way to becoming a bottle neck.

So the key is to minimize the number of issues that need our sign-off, then ridding the process of my sign-off requirement as quickly as possible. Remember, one of our three critical tasks as a leader is to design good processes. And excessive dependence on "my sign-off" is carte blanche evidence that either our process is not good or that we do not have confidence in the controls and people we've put in place.

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