

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

February 15, 2007

A Litmus Test for Leadership

by Dr. Mike Armour

Forty years ago, when I first started studying leadership, there were few books on the topic. But there were scores of books on management.

In recent years, that pattern has reversed itself. Now there are books everywhere on leadership, seemingly fewer on management.

The "in thing," it seems, is now to be a leader. In the rush to make everyone a leader, many companies simply redesignated their management titles. People who had long been "managers" were instantly renamed "leaders." Yet all too often, precious little was done to convert yesterday's managers into today's leaders.

Consequently, I deal regularly with people who call themselves leaders, but who are in fact simply rechristened managers. There is no significant difference in the way they function as "leaders" from the way they functioned as managers.

Now, my purpose here is not to denigrate management. All great leadership has an element of good management at its core. But leadership is a decidedly different enterprise from management.

Moreover, I deal with many people who call themselves leaders, but who cannot tell me what distinguishes leadership from management. So here are a few thoughts on the subject.

A Three-Point Checklist

Leadership, unlike management, is inevitably centered on people. While we speak of both managing people and leading people, we also talk about managing budgets. Or managing inventories.

But we would never speak of "leading a budget" or "leading an inventory." The words themselves sound strange to our ears. Managing a budget or managing an inventory requires no inherent people-focus. Leadership, on the other hand, is decidedly people-centric.

As an executive coach, I deal daily with men and women who call themselves leaders. Early on I need to determine whether they are genuine leaders or whether they simply wear the title.

This is how I settle the issue. I ask them three questions, either directly or indirectly.

- The first is, who are your people?
- Second, where are you taking them?
- And third, how are you equipping them for the journey?

From my perspective, these three questions sum up the essence of what constitutes leadership. Leadership is about taking people someplace significantly new and providing whatever it takes for them to get there successfully.

Leaders in Name Only

This very basic lesson is easily lost, even in mega-billion dollar corporations. A few years ago I consulted with a prominent national corporation that fit this mold. The company referred to its assistant vice-presidents as leaders. But many of the AVPs were in fact a one-person shop. They often had no one below them on the organization chart. Some did not even have an administrative assistant.

Call them what you will, these AVPs were not leaders. Leadership is always people-centric. A "leader" without people is not a leader.

Now, let's consider what would happen if we should give these AVPs a few dozen people to supervise. Would the AVPs now be leaders? Not unless the AVPs are taking their people someplace substantively new. If an AVP's role is primarily to assure that things run smoothly and efficiently, the AVP is doing nothing more than managing.

Leadership is never about tweaking the status quo. It's always about taking people to an entirely new place. Leadership inevitably entails a stretch.

Here again it's easy to confuse management and leadership. Managers like to talk about stretch goals. But stretch goals do not necessarily constitute leadership.

Stretch goals may be nothing more than squeezing added productivity from the status quo. Achieving these goals may not take people somewhere substantively new. Stretch goals are valuable management tools, to be sure. But to the degree that they merely tweak the status quo, they flow from management, not leadership.

Equipping Our People

So let's return to our AVPs. Now that they have people, let's imagine that the AVPs are taking their people somewhere new. Have the AVPs now transformed themselves into leaders?

Not unless they are proactively equipping their people to succeed over the long haul. This may be the place where leadership breaks down most frequently. The leadership task is not complete until leaders provide their people with the training, resources, freedom, authority, organizational structures, and support they need for enduring success.

This aspect of leadership goes unemphasized not only in practice, but even in books on leadership. Perhaps it's because providing resources and support begins to look more

like management than leadership. And to a certain extent, this perception is correct. That's why there is a component of good management in all great leadership.

But giving people what they need to succeed transcends management alone. It includes keeping them motivated and inspired. It includes giving them a sense of empowerment and significance. It includes developing bonds within the team that unleash genuine synergy. It includes keeping people focused on the end goal.

Providing these kinds of resources is more akin to leadership than to management. Equipping people for success thus entails an artful marriage of management and leadership. In our next issue we will explore ways to keep the management and leadership tasks in balance.

© 2007, MCA Professional Services Group, LLC

This article may be posted to a web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to www.leaderperfect.com. You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.