

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Can You Really “Lead From Behind”?

by Dr. Mike Armour

Let me begin with a disclaimer. This newsletter has always been apolitical. And it will remain so. Yet occasionally, when talking about leadership in the political realm, an article brushes the edge of politics. That's the case with this one.

Unlike any President before him, President Obama has identified his administration with "leading from behind." The phrase got considerable press in the days surrounding the push for regime change in Libya. In the ramp-up to overthrow Qadaffi, the President repeatedly said that America would "lead from behind."

The President's Strategy

What he was trying to communicate, or so it seems, is that the U.S. was not going to be out front in this situation, actively building a coalition to follow an American lead. This in contrast to the way that earlier Presidents had put together coalitions for the liberation of Kuwait or later the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Instead, President Obama envisioned America making its contribution and using its influence in the background, in more of a support role. Whether that was the appropriate strategy to pursue is not the topic of this article.

Rather, I want to focus on the phrase he chose: "leading from behind." Is it truly possible to lead from behind?

Is Leading from Behind Truly Leadership?

The knee-jerk reaction might be to say, "Yes." After all, Eisenhower did not hit the beaches of Omaha with his troops. Twenty years later the decision-makers who managed the Vietnam War were thousands of miles away in Washington. So it would seem that we have a history of leaders being far behind the lines when combat is underway.

My question is whether directing a war effort from afar truly constitutes leadership. You can manage from the rear. But can you lead from the rear? I would argue that you cannot.

I hasten to add that I'm not questioning the leadership skills and ability of Eisenhower, or of the flag officers who huddled in Washington daily to set priorities in Vietnam. When they were functioning in leadership roles, these men were typically solid leaders.

But when they were orchestrating the war effort from well behind the lines, were they functioning in a leadership role or in a management role? At that particular moment, I believe, they were functioning as managers.

The Consummate Manager Who Ran a War

I got to thinking about this lately while reading an article in *Forbes* magazine about Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense through much of the Vietnam War. He was a legendary manager, both before he went to Washington, during his tenure there, and afterwards as the head of the World Bank. The *Forbes* article did a stellar job of highlighting his managerial approach to running the war.

Being a veteran of the Vietnam era myself, I recall how often news commentators in those days talked about the "management of the war." It was a recurring theme on nightly news.

Anytime that the word "leadership" was used with regard to the war, it was inevitably in a story about some individual in the midst of the fighting who marshaled his comrades to achieve an exceptional feat.

And that's where leadership has always been exercised — out front, in the middle of the action. That's where you found Washington in the War of Independence. It's where you found Grant and Lee in the Civil War. It's where you found Teddy Roosevelt in the charge up San Juan Hill. It's where you found Patton in his relentless pursuit of the Germans, first across North Africa and later on the Continent.

Washington, Grant, Lee, Roosevelt, Patton — they would have all laughed at the notion that you can "lead from behind.". Manage from behind? Yes. Lead from behind? No.

"Leading" from Behind a Desk

While I've drawn my examples exclusively from military history, the same principle is at play in every business organization, non-profit, or institution. You may be able to manage from behind a desk. But you can't lead from behind a desk.

To lead you have to be closely engaged with those who are slugging it out in the trenches. You have to be visible, leading by example as well as by directive.

Of leadership's many roles, none is more vital than its focus on people, deepening their will to succeed and inspiring them to bring greater passion to the task at hand. You can do neither of these things sitting behind a desk in an office with an oft-closed door.

It therefore confuses the issue, I believe, to speak of "leading from behind." That threatens to put the mantle of leadership on people who are acting purely as managers, not as leaders.

Confusing Management with Leadership

As a leadership coach for a decade and a half, I've steadily challenged the tendency for organizations to confuse the notions of "management" and "leadership." From what I've

seen, American business and institutional life is not hurting for a lack of management. It's suffering from an inadequate concentration of leadership.

Thus, I would discourage any terminology that furthers the confusion of management with leadership. The idea of "leading from behind" merely adds to that very confusion.

After all, if the President can lead from behind, then any of us should be able to do so. Right? But what the moment calls for is not more people managing from behind. We need more people out front leading the charge.

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