

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Leadership: The Challenge That Won't Go Away

by Dr. Mike Armour

I first began teaching classes on leadership when I was in my 20s. That was in the late 1960s, when dinosaurs still roamed the earth!

Peter Drucker, the brilliant management guru, was coming into his heyday. His books on management were the "in thing" for executive reading. And publishers were churning out books on management in a seemingly endless stream.

By contrast, works on leadership were relatively few. The typical bookstore (if it carried leadership books at all) usually relegated them to a foot or two of shelf space.

Then, about 25 years ago, a shift began. Titles on leadership started multiplying, and the number of popular works on management slipped into steady decline.

As a result, most bookstores today devote far more shelf space to leadership than to management. Leadership is today's "in thing" for executives. Pricey leadership institutes have sprung up everywhere. And in almost every industry, keynote speakers on leadership are in high demand.

Why Such Emphasis on Leadership??

Recently I saw a video in which a process management specialist bemoaned this emphasis on leadership. The only reason that we feel an urgent need for leadership, he argued, is because managers as a whole are sub-par in their performance.

It was an intriguing thesis. But is it true? Without question, the leader's job is far less taxing when management is superb. But if managers one and all stepped up their game, would the need for leadership be sharply curtailed? I'm inclined to think not.

It's noteworthy that the man who made this observation is a specialist in process management.

The word "process" itself suggests an environment where reasonable degrees of structure, routine, and predictability prevail. This is also the very environment in which management contributes best. Management is largely about keeping things on schedule, on target, and under control.

From the macro perspective, however, our world is hardly a place where structure, routine, and predictability prevail. Quite the opposite. We cope constantly with change,

change that is coming at an unprecedented and accelerating pace. Circumstances and settings like this rely heavily on leadership to set new courses and blaze the way.

From Drucker's World to Toffler's World

Looking back, it's worth noting that the outpouring of leadership books began about the same time that Alvin Toffler published Future Shock. His instant best-seller arrested the world's attention with mind-boggling predictions of changes on the horizon.

Toffler offered a no-holds-barred assessment of how burgeoning technology and communication would change the workplace forever. And the pace of change, he insisted, would become relentless.

Decades later we realize that Toffler may have understated the case. Ours is now a business climate far removed from the one in which Drucker's influence reached its zenith.

Disrupted Execution Cycles

Drucker's stress on planning and execution was well and good, and remains no less vital today. But today's long-range plans can easily be outdated or obsolete before the ink dries.

Factors beyond our control routinely throw game-changing disruptions into our forecasts and plans, even those that we have researched and laid out most carefully.

Management alone, no matter how extraordinary, is ill-suited to anticipate and avoid these kinds of discontinuities. Management systems cannot track the myriad of variables, most beyond our purview, that can impede or even derail our success.

To regroup when the game rules change, to chart a new course when our path becomes unworkable, to keep spirits high in the midst of disruption, we depend far more heavily on leadership than management.

Thus, the emphasis on leadership will not soon go away. It's no mere coincidence that Future Shock and newfound enthusiasm for leadership books appeared simultaneously. The challenge to find and develop leaders will be constant for decades to come, because "future shock" shows no sign of letting up.

It's not my intention here to discredit management. Good management is always essential. I'm simply saying that management has inherent limitations that only leadership can address.

What's called for today is great management harnessed to great leadership. For us to succeed, neither can afford to be sub-par.

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