

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

October 15, 2009

A “Stretching Exercise” for Managers and Leaders

by Dr. Mike Armour

I frequently refer clients to Craig Hickman's book *Mind of a Manager, Soul of a Leader*. Written in 1990, the book is now a bit dated in some of its examples. But its basic principles are as valid as ever.

Hickman's purpose is to make a clear distinction between leadership as a function and management as a function. Unlike many books on this topic, however, he does not treat management as some poor cousin of leadership.

Instead, he chronicles the experience of companies that are very successful as management-dominated organizations. He then contrasts these with companies that are leadership dominated. He shows that both types of companies can have comparable measures of success. One approach is not inherently better than the other.

The key, he argues, is for the executive team to grasp the organization's contextual moment. Does the current context call for a management-dominated approach? Or does the context beg for leadership to be at the fore?

The question then becomes whether key players in the culture can shift styles appropriately. For instance, I'm working currently with several companies that have been management-dominated for decades. And successfully so. Understandably, therefore, the internal promotion process — not to mention the hiring process — has elevated people who find themselves at home in management-dominated settings.

New Realities

The current economic downturn, however, has thrust these organizations into unprecedented circumstances. Wholesale and often irreversible change has swept across their industry and their markets. No amount of management can extract them from their predicament.

What's called for now is a leadership-centric response. Innovation. Visionary initiatives. That's what the present moment requires. And these functions put a premium on leadership.

The question becomes, can executives with a management-dominated DNA shift gears and become the leaders the current context demands? In a word, how flexible is their executive style?

Sadly, many top people who have excelled in a management-dominated culture are floundering as they strive to become leaders. To quote the title of a famous Robert Heinlein novel, they are strangers in a strange land.

It's not my purpose in this issue to dissect the particular struggles that these people are going through or to point to possible solutions. Instead, I simply want to underscore that in a world of unprecedented change, success as an executive will increasingly mandate effortless flexibility in shifting from being first and foremost a manager to being first and foremost a leader; then reversing the movement at a later point when the moment dictates a shift back to a management style.

This means that emerging executives must have a personal development plan that emphasizes both management skills and leadership abilities. Corporate HR departments must see that "up-and-comers" are strengthened in both their management and leadership credentials.

Let me therefore make these suggestions to all of my readers. First, ask yourself, "Does my map of the world include a clear distinction between what it means to manage and what it means to lead?" If not, I recommend that you begin some reading or other training that will help you make that distinction. (Hickman's book is a great place to start.)

Three Vital Questions

Once you are fairly adroit at describing the difference between management and leadership, then move to a second developmental step. It consists of routinely asking three questions whenever a problem or challenge presents itself.

Begin by asking, "How would a manager approach this situation?" Followed by a second question, "How would a leader approach this situation?" Contrast the two approaches.

Follow with the third question: "Does the context call for a management-centric or a leadership-centric response?" Sometimes you may conclude that it calls for both. That's okay. Many situations do. But as you implement a double-pronged approach, continually be tracking which elements of your response are a leadership function and which ones are a management function.

If you persist in asking these questions over a period of time whenever you are faced with responding to a problem or challenge, asking them will become second-nature to you. Just by asking them regularly, you will condition yourself to constantly monitor whether your actions are those of a manager or whether they are more characteristic of a leader. In the process you will strengthen your flexibility in shifting seamlessly from management to leadership styles.

Good managers do not always transition easily to leadership. And solid leaders often come up short as managers. Flexibility is thus a stretch for both personalities.

You are therefore never too early in your career to begin learning essential skills on both sides of the management-leadership divide. The more fully you develop the flexibility to shift effortlessly between management and leadership styles, the more valuable you will be to your organization — and to its success.

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