

Combatting Muddled Concepts of Leadership

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Today I'm resuming a series which I began in January in which we are doing something of a deep dive into the way that I define leadership. I had to forego a podcast last week because an upper respiratory bug left me with an unreliable voice. But with this episode, we resume the discussion.

You may be asking, however, "Why spend time on something so basic as explaining the definition of leadership?" And the answer is fairly straightforward.

I describe my purpose in life as helping people succeed by arming them with clarity and insight. I've spent my life approaching that purpose in a host of different ways – from teaching to writing to training to coaching to mentoring to consulting to keynoting to podcasting, and so forth and so on. The common goal in all of these endeavors has been to help people succeed. And the common theme in my approach has been to arm them with clarity and insight.

And I purposefully put clarity before insight. If we do not have proper clarity on a topic, our insight into it will be limited or even flawed. Leadership is such a vital topic, in my view, that I feel a particular compulsion to equip people with a clear and cogent understanding of what it means.

What I've discovered, however, is that lack of clarity on a topic often begins with lack of precision in how we define it. I spend much of my time, therefore, struggling to simplify the definition of key terms and concepts in order to communicate them with clarity.

And the truth is, I run into confusion everywhere as to what constitutes genuine leadership. I started noticing this confusion 25 years ago and have been working to counter it ever since.

So, today I'm taking us on a little side journey. Before we plant ourselves fully again in the definition of leadership, let's take a historical look at what has happened over the past century to leave our notion of leadership somewhat muddled. In the process, I'm confident that you will gain a number of insights which are sure to upsize your leadership.

My first forays into teaching leadership came in my early 20s. And for those of you who don't know my age, that was over 50 years ago. I did not go looking for these opportunities. They came seeking me. In particular, they came from churches and non-profit organizations.

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Now, why on earth would any organization led by middle-aged and older people turn to a fellow not yet 25 years old to train them on leadership? Here's how it came about. It happened against a backdrop which dates back to the nineteenth century.

That's when we first began studying management academically. Of course, management had been around for millennia. Think of the management prowess required to build the pyramids of Egypt or the sprawling capitals of ancient empires or the towering cathedrals of medieval Europe.

We have therefore always had great managers. But management, as such, was never subjected to what we would today call scientific study. The first faltering steps in the direction of such study occurred late in the 1800s. Interestingly, what we refer to as management was more commonly known as "administration" in the nineteenth century. That's why, when universities finally took up management as an academic discipline, the resulting degree was called a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) or Master of Business Administration (MBA). It's also why many departments of government are still called "administrations." The Social Security Administration. The Federal Housing Administration. The Federal Aviation Administration.

Characteristically, these earliest degree programs said little to nothing about "leadership." In fact, it would be nearly a century before degrees in leadership became common in university curriculum. A mere 20 years ago, a major university hired me to teach what was the first course on leadership ever included in their Executive MBA curriculum.

Academic and corporate interest in management paid handsome dividends. Bringing a more rigorous and scientific thought process to management challenges vaulted the U.S. into global leadership as an industrial and commercial power. And the Second World War cemented the reputation of management. You can build the case that we won the Second World War as much by out-managing the Axis Powers on the home front as by out-leading them on the battlefield.

As a result, we emerged from the Second World War with almost a worshipful respect for management. But there was still little interest in leadership – except in two places. The military. And the non-profit sector. I will explain why in a moment.

The study of management, you see, began in the day of a relatively uneducated workforce and relatively simple technology. Outside of a few professional fields, few jobs required a college degree. Even licenses to practice law could still be obtained through self-study and by passing a state bar exam.

In general, therefore, workers were rather interchangeable. The skill level required for most jobs was minimal, at best. In fact, some of the most influential early management texts spoke condescendingly of labor. Workers were merely another resource to be managed as dispassionately as one would manage an inventory or a set of raw materials.

So long as that kind of mindset prevailed, leadership was an irrelevant subject. That's because leadership is always people-centric. Let me remind you of the definition of leadership which I prefer: Leadership is the art of rallying people around a shared purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it.

Based on that definition, our previous episode talked about people and purpose as the two anchor points of leadership. In next week's episode we will talk about the words "rallying" and

“motivating” in the definition. They imply emotional engagement with those whom we lead. Until people are viewed as key to our success, leadership is seen as having little value.

Which brings me back those two institutions – the military and non-profits – who were interested in leadership, even when it was a neglected subject everywhere else. And I’m not talking about military regimes in general. I’m speaking specifically of the American military establishment.

From the outset, due in no small measure to the way the Continental Congress marshalled forces for the American Revolution, the United States has relished the concept of the citizen soldier. We have never been great fans of conscription. Ideally, we believe, our fighting forces should be made up of volunteers.

Which makes the military much like a nonprofit organization in that regard. Nonprofits depend on volunteers even more than the American military. Volunteers in the military, once enlisted or commissioned, cannot renege on their commitment. They cannot “unvolunteer.” But people “unvolunteer” from nonprofits all the time.

Both the American military and the non-profit sector thus have a vested interest in motivating and mobilizing people. Leadership is core to their continued existence.

With that said, let me step back to those days in my early twenties when churches and non-profits started asking me to conduct leadership training. I had established myself as a leader and a public speaker by that point in my life. I had been a student body president and a championship speaker in both high school and college. Nonprofits who knew me therefore had confidence in my presentation skills and my ability to win the support of people whom I needed to influence.

Moreover, I had enlisted in the naval reserve at 17, while still in high school, and then spent three years on active duty during the Vietnam War. I had advanced through the enlisted ranks in record time, so people presumed that I must know something about leading.

And it was that confluence of credentials that led to those early-in-life requests for me to provide leadership training. Leaders in churches and nonprofits read books on management often enough. But they realized that the management texts of their day were often not relevant to the world in which they functioned. These texts paid too little attention to the people factor in getting things done.

Their solution? Find someone with leadership training in the military to share what he had learned from the experience. Thus, those early-in-life invitations. To be honest, however, I felt inadequate for these initial opportunities. I was by no means an authority on leadership. I needed to get up to speed.

That took me to one bookstore after another. And I soon made an eye-opening discovery. The typical bookstore of the day might have a wall filled with books on management. But only a short shelf with maybe five or six titles on leadership. And most of these leadership books were written by former military officers, passing along ideas from their leadership training at a service academy and their application of those ideas during their career.

This was happening in the 1960s. And with regard to books on leadership, the situation remained largely unchanged for another two decades. Only in the mid-1980s did books by

Warren Bennis and others appear which examined leadership as a substantively different enterprise from management.

The success of these early books on leadership led to an explosion of interest in the subject. By now, technology had become so sophisticated and workplace skill requirements so advanced that business and industry could no longer survive with anything but a well-educated workforce. And as workers became increasingly specialized in their skillsets, they were no longer interchangeable.

Workers now had to be the centerpiece of a manager's focus. As a result, the 1990s saw a flood of books on how to lead. Leadership was the "new thing." Suddenly, every young manager wanted to be known as a leader. To be a leader meant being on the cutting edge.

It was during this time that I began my first leadership development work in corporate America. And I saw an intriguing pattern. As executives pressed more and more to be known as leaders, many companies accommodated them by merely rebaptizing them. That is, one day they were described as part of a management committee, the next as members of the leadership team. Yesterday they were managers. Today they are leaders.

But nothing else changed in their role, the expectations of how they would perform, the criteria on which they were evaluated, the outcomes which they were charged with creating. They were managers – sometimes very effective managers – who wore a leadership title. But they were not leaders.

I first saw this in two Fortune 100 companies where I would be engaged to coach a mid-level leader, or so I was told. On more than one occasion, I would ask one of these so-called "leaders" to tell me about his or her people.

More than once, I received the reply, "I don't have any people. I do share an admin assistant with another leader. But I have no direct reports." In other words, they were managing a function, not even managing people. And if they were not managing people, how could they possibly be a leader?

I encountered situations like this so often that I developed three questions which I routinely put to people whom I was engaged to coach. The first was, "Who are your people?" I didn't mean by that, "Can you name them?" (although often enough I found managers who did not even know the names of many who worked around them). When I asked, "Who are your people?", I was really asking, "How much can you tell me about them? What are their values? What makes them tick?"

The second question was, "Where are you taking them?" After all, the very nature of being a leader is to take people to an identified destination. And the third question was, "What are you doing at present to equip them for the journey?"

What I found was that most people who called themselves leaders could do a reasonably good job of answering the first two questions. Very few, however, had a meaningful response to the third one. They were not developing their people. They were not coaches and mentors to their workers. In effect, they were leaving the preparation of their people for success to chance and happenstance.

All three of these questions are essential to the work of leading. Who are your people? Where are you taking them? And what are you doing to equip them for the journey?

After repeatedly encountering this confused notion of leadership, I began a practice, which continues to this day, of being sure that every client fully grasps the difference between what it means to manage and what it means to lead. As in all things, my goal is first clarity, then insight.

Now you know why clarifying the definition of leadership ranks so high on my priorities. Few undertakings in our world are nearly as important as great leadership. And great leadership begins with clarity on what it means to lead.

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