

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The Leader People Want Today

by Dr. Mike Armour

I've been a leader my entire life. And I've been training on leadership for four decades.

Recently I was asked to describe the most significant changes that I've seen in leadership during that time. The most telling change, in my judgment, has been a shift in what is expected of leaders and what this shift implies for leadership styles.

There was a time, not so long ago, when people looked to leaders primarily to take charge, to be decisive, and to get things done. But now people also want leaders who will empower them, equip them for success, and position them to fulfill their complete potential.

As a result, people are less and less tolerant of leadership styles that smack of authoritarianism, even in the slightest. They are looking for leaders whose approach is collaborative rather than controlling, leaders who communicate through dialogue rather than top-down directives, and leaders who see themselves more as coaches than as bosses.

Emergence of the Leader-Coach

Forty years ago, when I started teaching leadership, you never heard leaders and managers described as coaches. Today the concept of the leader-coach is so widespread that even MBA programs address it. I've taught several MBA seminars on this topic myself, and the classes always max out in terms of enrollment. Fifteen years ago few, if any, would have signed up.

Does this mean that authoritarianism is dead? No, not entirely. And it never will be. There are certain leadership roles that will always demand an authoritarian, top-down, command-and-control approach.

This is particularly true in military and quasi-military organizations such as law enforcement or fire fighting. Because these professions put life on the line at a moment's notice, they demand the decision-making efficiency and the organizational discipline of a command-and-control culture. But elsewhere, fewer and fewer places welcome military style leadership.

So, what kind of leadership are workers looking for? When you put that question to people, they offer a variety of words to describe the ideal business leader. But their responses basically boil down to one thing: they are looking for leaders who are more driven to serve than to be served.

This doesn't mean that workers expect leaders to be servile or passive or unassertive. Quite the contrary. Today's workers want strong, self-confident leaders who exercise power and authority well. But they also want leaders who use their power and authority to promote the success of their people, both collectively and individually.

More Than Just Leaders Who Care

I'm not suggesting that authoritarian leaders do not care about their people's well-being. As a retired naval officer, and now as a leadership coach, I've worked alongside scores of authoritarian leaders. Many of them care deeply about their people, far deeper than popular stereotypes suggest.

But what we are talking about here goes beyond simply caring for people or being concerned about their well-being. We're talking about a depth of engagement between leaders and their people that is rare in authoritarian leadership.

In authoritarian organizations, even the most benevolent ones, it's always clear that workers serve management and that management sets the agenda, pure and simple. The line between management and workers is clear and distinct.

- Workers have little voice, if any, in decision-making.
- Their personal development is given little priority.
- And communication is almost exclusively top-down.

To the outside observer, it appears that leadership is in place solely to be served. And each level of leadership sees its purpose as serving the levels of leadership above it.

Contrast this to leadership styles that are most effective with most workers today. Here the line between the leaders and the led is far less visible and pronounced.

- Collaboration between leaders and workers is on-going and routine.
- The atmosphere is more collegial than coercive.
- Leadership consults regularly with employees, draws out their best thinking, actively looks for their creative ideas and solutions, and

- builds strong networks of support and respect through the entire organization.
- Workers feel valued, not because they are praised or rewarded, but because they are invited to participate in the life of the organization at a meaningful level.

In this setting leaders still serve the leadership above them. But they are equally given to serving their peers, their people, and even the broader community that their organization touches. For them the emphasis is not so much on serving as leaders as it is on leading to serve.

I'll have more to say along these lines in the next issue.

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