

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Seven Leadership Essentials

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Over the years I've relied on a several insightful definitions of leadership. Lately, in keynotes and trainings, I've been using this one:

Leadership is the art of marshalling people around a common purpose, then motivating and mobilizing them to achieve it.

This definition captures the essence of leadership, wherever it is exercised. It is equally valid whether you're leading a volunteer effort in the neighborhood or heading a global enterprise.

You might think of it as the "3-M Model of Leadership" — marshalling, motivating, and mobilizing. Beyond these three terms, four others words in the definition are important. Let's look at each one.

Art

Leadership is more nearly an art than a science. Each year, of course, volumes of scientific research are published on leadership. But while the research may be scientific, leadership itself is not. Any effort to reduce leadership to a fixed set of formulas is doomed to fail. We will see why below.

Comparing leadership to art is a helpful analogy. Like artists, leaders have many different styles. Some have a charismatic style, others a more reserved style. Some are detail oriented, others more focused on the big picture. No two leaders go at their art in quite the same way. And just as artists change their technique from one medium to another, good leaders may apply techniques differently from one context to another.

As in art, however, certain general principles hold true in leadership, whatever the style. And this is where leadership research has its value. It identifies those universal principles which must be artfully and consistently applied if leadership is to succeed.

People

Leadership is always a people process. This is one feature that sets leadership apart from management. We speak of managing people, budgets, projects, or perceptions. But we never speak of "leading a budget" or of "leading a perception." We only speak of leading people.

And this is why leadership can never be reduced to a fixed set of formulas. Formulas are built on variables. And no formula can capture the immense variability in people. Without

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people, moreover, no one is a leader. The first question of leadership is, "Who are your people?" If you cannot answer this question precisely and succinctly, you've not yet donned the mantle of leadership.

Purpose

If the first question of leadership is "Who are your people?", the second question is "Where are you taking them?" Leadership is about taking people from where they are to some place else. The task of the leader, then, is to define this "some place else." Once in place, this definition of "some place else" becomes the purpose of the leadership endeavor.

Dependent on the size of the endeavor, "some place else" may be expressed as a cause, a vision, a mission, a challenging goal, a set of outcomes, or a list of objectives. There is frequent debate over the difference between a vision and a mission or between goals and objectives. Most of that debate is rather useless in terms of moving the leadership enterprise forward. Great leaders don't fret about such distinctions. Rather, they create a unifying purpose for their people, then let people call it what they may. The leader is concerned about getting to the outcome, not naming it properly.

Marshalling

Once purpose is defined, the next task of leadership is to bring people together to achieve it. Historically this meant bringing them together physically. George Washington relied on soldiers to join him from all over the colonies. Today the physical marshalling of people is not always necessary. Many leaders work through virtual networks that use technology to tie together people in far-flung locales.

Even if the leader does not bring people together physically, leadership must still bring them together psychologically and emotionally. This, too, is part of the "marshalling" duty of leaders. Another "marshalling" duty is to rally people around the leader and the leader's cause. Ultimately "marshalling" also entails succession planning — bringing in fresh blood to carry the enterprise forward, even if current leadership is removed from the scene.

Motivating

Motivation is what causes us to take action, what causes us to "move out." And motivation is grounded in values. Values are what we move toward or away from.

The leader's motivational role is to form psychological linkage between the Purpose of the endeavor and the values of the People who will achieve it. Ideally the leader will succeed at making this linkage so strong that personal motivation within the group turns into passion. Put simply, we motivate by providing the motive and the reinforcing emotions that lead someone to serve willingly and eagerly. As we said in a [recent issue](#) of this newsletter, leadership's role is to instill dreams, perseverance, confidence, and courage in others.

Mobilization

Mobilization is the process of translating the Motivation of the People into concrete action. Mobilization succeeds to the degree that it follows the "Eight-Fold Path of

Leadership," as I call it (adapting the phrase from the "Eight-Fold Path" of Buddhism). It means doing eight things properly. Namely it means having the right people doing the right things at the right time and the right place with the right tools and the right methods for the right reasons and the right outcomes. That's a pretty tall order. But it pretty well encapsulates the management side of leadership.

Achievement

The most important thing leadership does is get results. A few great leaders in history (Hannibal comes to mind as one example) are remembered for their leadership skill, even though their enterprise failed. Still, for the most part we think of "great leaders" only in terms of those who led people to a remarkable outcome.

True leaders are therefore inherently results-oriented. The challenge is for the leader to maintain a balance between being results-oriented and people-oriented. Without people, leadership cannot achieve its purpose. Without achievement, the people will lose heart and drop out (emotionally, if not physically).

In Summary

Marshalling can be seen as the unifying function of leadership. Motivating is the inspirational function of leadership. And mobilizing is the implementation function of leadership. They all must carry their weight in order for achievement to occur. And in the final analysis, achievement is the only justification for leadership.

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