

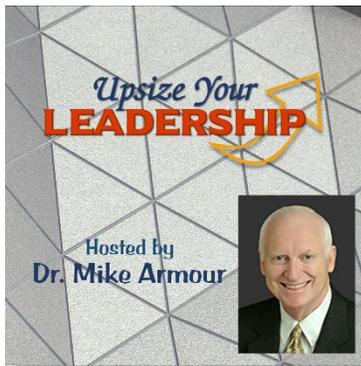
Three Pivotal Questions for Leaders

What Sets Leadership Apart

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As a leadership coach, I've had the opportunity to work with many extraordinary leaders. I've also had the occasion to work with some truly exceptional managers who *thought* they were leaders, but who were not in fact acting as leaders.

At the outset of a coaching relationship, it's not always apparent whether I'm working with a client who is indeed a leader or one who would be more accurately described as a manager. A superb manager, perhaps. But still, a manager, not a leader in the fullest sense of the term.

It's therefore important to me, early in a coaching engagement, to determine which of these two categories best describes my new client. In making that determination, I've come to rely on

three questions in particular. They zero in on the difference which sets leaders apart from managers and from individual contributors.

Over the next twenty minutes I want to introduce you to these three questions. When you can answer all three of them concisely and with clarity, you have built a solid foundation on which to upsize your leadership.

Fascination with Management after World War II

I conducted my first leadership training programs when I was in my twenties. That was in the early 1970s. In those days, the self-development resources for aspiring leaders were quite limited, to say the least.

The typical bookstore of that era might have had three or four titles on leadership. Never more than that. And a great many of them were written by former military officers who were making business applications of leadership principles which they had learned at West Point or at Annapolis.

In fact, it was rare to find any training on leadership outside of the military. And when the occasional organization did decide to pursue leadership training, they commonly turned to someone with a military background to conduct it.

That's precisely how I was drafted into teaching my first classes on leadership. Churches and non-profits, knowing of my years of naval service, would ask me to put together a course on leadership. That's when I learned how few books were available on the subject.

By contrast, books on management were abundantly and readily available. That same bookstore which had only a handful of titles on leadership might have had a wall covered in books on management. Peter Drucker, the dean of American management thought, was in his heyday. And universities everywhere were rushing to establish MBA programs.

Management was all the vogue. For the most part, the topic of leadership was a peripheral subject. And the fascination with management was somewhat understandable given the recent experience of the Second World War. That war was still fresh in the national memory, and all but the very youngest adults had lived through it.

A centerpiece of those memories were heroic achievements on distant battlefields. Yet, truth be told, the U.S. had won the war as much by out-managing and out-producing the enemy as by outfighting the enemy. American manufacturing was able to churn out more weaponry, combat equipment, and fire power than Germany, Italy, and Japan combined. And it did so at mind-boggling speed. No less amazing was the speed with which logistics know-how was able to rush military hardware from the production line into the heart of the war zone itself. This was all management on bold display.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that leadership played a subordinate role in winning the war. Leadership was clearly pivotal and decisive in the eventual Allied success. But leadership was primarily evident in military and a few political circles. What stood out in the manufacturing and logistics sectors was management.

By war's end, both the business and political communities were fully enamored with the power of good management. The immediate postwar years served to elevate that regard, as American manufacturing, through superb management practices, came to dominate the global economy through the 1950s and beyond.

Emergent Interest in Leadership

As a result, for a generation or more, both the business and academic worlds put far more emphasis on management than on leadership. In the 1980s, however, that began to change. One harbinger of the change was the appearance of ground-breaking works on leadership by Warren Bennis at the University of Southern California. Today, forty years later, his writings are still read widely and enthusiastically.

Soon others followed suit in promoting the importance of leadership, so that during the 1990s a steady stream of books on leadership made their appearance.

Interestingly, this surge of interest in leadership coincided with the emergence of dozens of high-tech companies which quickly became household names. Not only did these companies rise rapidly to prominence, they were typically the brainchild of men and women who had not worked their way to the top through layers of corporate management. In their thinking, they were not anchored to management concepts which governed long-established corporate cultures.

Instead, they were entrepreneurial and innovative and, for the most part, rather young – sometimes extremely young. They therefore put together companies which reflected their

innovative spirit, companies designed to move rapidly, take risks as a matter of routine, and change course immediately in light of new technologies and market developments.

The people who spearheaded these firms gradually came to be known as leaders, in part because their companies were leading a wholesale revolution of American business and manufacturing practices. And because of their storied success, an avid admiration for leadership took stage. In short order, being known as a “leader” became the “in thing” for aspiring managers.

Unfortunately, some who got caught up in this new-found enthusiasm for leadership jumped to misguided conclusions. I would hear them speak dismissively of management as being somewhat passé and old fashioned. I even heard people suggest – or say outright at times – that leadership was qualitatively superior to management. For people who held that perspective, being a leader was somehow better than being a manager.

An Exercise in Renaming Managers

But they were not alone in wanting to be known as “leaders” rather than “managers.” And by the late 1990s, many organizations were responding – including some of the largest corporations in the U.S. – by simply rebaptizing their management echelons. In effect they said, “Yesterday you were called a manager, today you’re called a leader. Yesterday you were a member of the management committee, today you’re a member of the leadership team.”

But despite this renaming, nothing changed in either the expectations, the performance evaluations, or the scope of responsibilities on the shoulders of these renamed managers. No concerted effort was made to convert them into genuine leaders. As a consequence, the words “manager” and “leader” became all but synonymous in many corporate cultures.

When I took on coaching engagements in these cultures, I frequently found myself working with people who thought of themselves as leaders, because they had been called a leader for years. But as I examined how they approached their duties and responsibilities, it was soon apparent that they were actually very effective managers, but not truly leaders. And when I would ask what they saw as the difference between management and leadership, some had no clear sense of that distinction.

Quite frequently, therefore, I now build coaching conversations around the factors which distinguish leadership from management. I typically initiate these conversations by noting that we speak both of managing people and leading people. We also speak of managing budgets and managing inventories.

But we would never speak of leading a budget or leading an inventory. We only lead people.

Leadership is uniquely people-centric in a way that management may or may not be.

Once I’ve made that point, I then want to help my client grasp the essence of leadership and to do so quickly.

Therefore, I ask three vital questions which every leader should be able to answer without pause.

The People You Lead

The first question is, “Who are your people?” And before they answer, I clarify the question. I’m not asking, “Can you name your people? Can you give me a general description of them? Can you show me where they appear on the organization chart?”

No, what I’m asking is, “How well do you really know your people?” What are their values? What motivates them? What makes them tick? What are they looking for in a job other than a salary?

No priority is more urgent for leaders than successfully motivating their people and keeping morale within the organization at an optimal level. To achieve these goals, leaders must truly know their people.

Your Destination

The second question is, where are you taking them? The very notion of a leader is that he or she is going someplace and is asking others to follow. This means that leaders keep themselves oriented on the future at all times.

James Kouzes and Barry Posner spent years interviewing people around the globe about what they expected of leaders. They shared many of their findings in their book *The Truth About Leadership*. One of their most notable discoveries is how people differ in the traits which they want from leaders and the ones which they want from peers who are individual contributors.

In both cases the number one desired quality is honesty. For leaders, however, the number two desired quality is a clear focus on the future . . . having a distinct picture of where they want to go and motivating others to join them in striving for that destination. People universally want to know of their leaders, “Where are you going? Where are you taking us?”

By contrast, having a compelling focus on the future did not even make the list of the top ten qualities which workers most want to see in their peers. In fact, at the end of their research, Kouzes and Posner concluded that **being future-focused is the single greatest difference in what people expect of leaders and what they expect of others.**

A leader’s focus on the future has both a long-term and a near-term component. Leaders are always looking down the road, anticipating what lies beyond the next curve, over the next hill. But they never allow themselves to become so singularly focused on distant possibilities that they take their eye off of what lies immediately ahead. Whatever the ultimate goal, they always know what needs to happen next. And with both the long-term and the near-term destinations in mind, they keep their people moving forward, always in the right direction.

All true leaders are taking people someplace. What sets great leaders apart is that they take people where their people have never been before. And extraordinary leaders sometimes take people somewhere that neither the people nor their leader has ever been before.

How Are You Equipping Your People?

This then brings us to my third question and the one which usually elicits the weakest response. **The third question is, “What are you doing to equip your people for the journey?”** In other

words, what is your development program for your people in light of the journey ahead and the demands which it will place on them?

It's no accident that the largest training organization in the world is the U.S. military. Before sending soldiers, sailors, and airmen into harm's way, the Defense Department wants to be certain that they are prepared for whatever they may encounter. History clearly documents that well-trained fighting units have often withheld determined assaults by forces far larger in size numerically.

Like military commanders who never fully know what will unfold in the course of combat, leaders may not always know explicitly what lies around the curve or over the next hill. And they certainly may not know what awaits several hills down the road. But as best they can, they form a picture of what that scenario may entail and start giving their people the skills, resources, and know-how to cope with it when they get there.

Leaders are therefore in the people-development business. There's no magic template for developing people. But true leaders will have a template which they are following. Not only will they know the template, they will make sure that their people understand it, too. In communicating with their followers, leaders routinely tie what they are asking people to do today to what they are preparing them for tomorrow.

Asking Repeatedly

So, there are the three questions:

Who are your people?

Where are you taking them?

What are you doing to prepare and equip them for the journey?

As I've posed these questions today, how did you answer them in terms of your own leadership context? Where do you need to shore up your responses?

And may I add that these three questions are never fully answered, once and for all. That is, you can't merely answer them once, then never revisit them. As events unfold and realities change, the exact place that we are taking our people may need to shift. And when that happens, a corresponding change may be necessary in how we are equipping them for the journey. And of course, people do come and go, which means that the question, "Who are your people?" has a somewhat fluid answer. You will never be free of needing to know your people better.

And one more thing before we conclude., Perhaps you're in a role right now which gives you little opportunity to function as a leader. Maybe you don't even have a team which reports to you. I fully understand. I've been in those positions a number of times over my career. But you can still make profitable use of the three questions which we have raised today. In your current role, as you consider what you want from those to whom you look for leadership, ask yourself these questions:

How much do I think my manager or leader truly knows me?

How clear am I on where my manager or leader is taking us?

What specifically is my manager or leader doing to prepare us for that journey?

Think about those questions and notice how it feels inside when you consider the answers. If you answer that your manager or leader does not know you well, what does that do to your sense of being valued and appreciated. If you are uncertain about where your manager or leader is taking you, what does that do to your level of motivation? And if you sense that developing you for the future is not a management priority, how does that color your emotional commitment to your daily responsibilities?

Contrast these feelings with the ones which you experience when you do feel valued and understood by your manager or leader, when you know where he or she is taking you, and when you have a clear conviction that he or she is committed to developing your potential.

Use this set of contrasts as a reference point for how your own people will feel when you are in a leadership capacity and they are looking to you for answers to these questions. In other words, you don't have to be in the role of a leader to learn valuable lessons about how to be a better leader when the time comes for you to take the lead.

Remember, **leadership is always people-centric. And as a leader you are not truly people-centric unless you know your people, you know where you're taking them, and you are preparing them and equipping them for the journey.**

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