



Good Leaders Understand Relationships

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What is the difference between management and leadership?



I ask this question as an icebreaker whenever I am teaching a class on leadership to grad school students. I use the question to get the students engaged and (hopefully) get their creative juices flowing. My question is not anecdotal—I call on at least five students every class to share their thoughts. I also assure them that I am not looking for a textbook definition, I just want to see what they think.

Some students take an easy path. Since they know that I am there to discuss leadership, they make an argument that management is “bad,” while leadership is “good.” When somebody inevitably goes in that direction, I remind them that some of history’s most effective leaders have been truly evil people: Leadership is neither inherently good nor bad.

After I’ve been successful in getting a real discussion going, I share my thoughts, and it usually goes something like this: “In its simplest form, management is just making stuff happen. Leadership is influencing people to make stuff happen. You can add complexity to the definition with all sorts of qualifiers ranging from organizational goals to vision, but the key idea is this: People may be part of any management situation, but they are the critical component of any leadership equation. At its core, leadership is about people and relationships.”

Wise leaders understand this idea and do everything they can to understand themselves and others. Better understanding leads to an increased potential for influence.

RELATIONSHIPS: THE CORE OF LEADERSHIP

I recently addressed the national convention of AMSUS, the Society of Federal Health Professionals, and my theme was all about people and the criticality of relationships in any leadership situation. I even told the story of my relationship with then-Petty Officer Wayne “Doc” Bailey and how he tirelessly worked to save numerous lives during my second deployment to Iraq. Doc was the youngest member of our small team embedded with the Iraqi Special Police Commandoes, but he was easily the most valuable member. In addition to saving lives, Doc taught the commandoes lifesaving skills for combat, which could help them learn how to save lives when U.S. medical personnel were not present during a fight. His deep concern and care for those he served with inspires me to this day, nearly 20 years later. People are at the core of every leadership equation, and effective leaders understand that.

Relationships between you and your boss, your peers, and your clients are all important, and the techniques and styles you employ to

have a meaningful influence on each group will differ. Relationships with your subordinates, however, may be the most critical. After all, it is that group who will be most affected by your leadership.

I have served with both good and bad leaders around the world, and have learned something valuable from every one of them. One generalization is evident: From the eyes of a subordinate, leaders who strive to lead by example are far more effective than those who don't. In contrast, those who say "Do as I say, not as I do" degrade morale and are not very effective, especially when lives are on the line.

It has also been my experience that it is pretty easy to fool the boss, much harder to fool one's peers, and virtually impossible to fool the subordinates. I have occasionally failed to see toxic behavior several levels down inside my organization, and only by spending time and energy at lower levels (doing what some proponents have called "management by walking around") did I learn what was happening. I have been fooled by brilliant results before, only to learn that they were achieved through the abuse of our troops.

TOXIC OR NOT?

I once had an employee (a medical operations planner) who was accused of being "toxic" by her subordinates. The accusation caught me by surprise since I thought that she was one of our best leaders. Mindful of my own history of occasionally misjudging my subordinate leaders, I decided to dig deep to find out what was happening. I questioned her and learned that she was both confused and devastated by the accusations—not the sort of reaction I'd expect from somebody who was truly toxic.

When I interviewed her employees, they consistently said that she gave them huge tasks near the end of the day with early-morning deadlines, forcing them to work late every night.

Back to my leader who was accused of being toxic. When I questioned her about her delegation and tasking behaviors, I learned a couple of key facts. First, she had an incredible work ethic, and missed meals with the family were (to her) not a big deal. Second, she initially gave a lot of latitude to her employees to figure out how to complete a task (which was positive), but then got around to marking up their work at the end of

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the day, saying she wanted it back the first thing in the morning. When I grilled her to find out what was important about the timing, I learned that there was nothing driving the early-morning deadline other than her need to get things done. She had a high need for achievement, and it gave her great satisfaction to make lists of things to do every day and then check them off once the tasks were completed.

The solution was simple. I coached her to ask her employees when they could deliver the corrected product and give them back ownership of the timing. If they responded with “next Tuesday,” that was usually fine. If not, she could help them adjust. I also helped her understand that a missed family meal was a heck of a lot more important than she seemed to think. In the end, her employees were happy, our work was completed to standard, and I learned more about one of my key leaders. More important, she learned more about herself.

If I had not invested the time and effort to find out what was happening, I might have acted on the initial accusations, and all of us would have lost. Dig in and listen when you are seeking an explanation on a matter—you might learn something valuable.

The next time you face a tough leadership challenge, think about the people you are trying to lead. What is their perspective? What motivates them? How can I best reach them in order to achieve the desired effect? Once you have that understanding, plan your move and do it, realizing that the best technique for one group in one setting may fail in another context. This is why leadership is an art, as well as a science. The master leadership artists understand the criticality of people and relationships. Good luck in your leadership journey!

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