

THE SKILLS YOU NEED GUIDE TO LEADERSHIP

LEARNING TO LEAD:

Understanding Leadership &
Developing Your Leadership Style



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Understanding Leadership & Developing Your Leadership Style

Skills You Need

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“Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

Just as greatness, so the same could be said of leadership. There are many people who do not seek leadership positions but find that they are called upon to step up and display leadership, either occasionally or on an ongoing basis.

This eBook is designed particularly for new leaders, or those who are preparing for leadership, whether on a temporary or more permanent basis. However, established leaders should also find interesting ideas here.



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PART 1:

LEARNING TO LEAD
Understanding Leadership
and Developing Your
Leadership Style

1

What is a Leader?

A TRADITIONAL VIEW OF LEADERSHIP

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a leader as:



“The person who leads or commands a group, organization, or country: the leader of a protest group, a natural leader”

There is, in many senses, a degree of formality about the term ‘leader’. A whole organisation accepts one person as its ‘leader’ and, by virtue of that badge of rank, the leader has formal authority and power. This can lead new leaders to infer that they need to be able to do everything, and do it right every time.

However, taken to extremes, there are some very real dangers in this view. For example, if an organisation has only one leader, that person can come to be seen as the source of all ideas and the maker of all decisions. The rest of the organisation must, therefore, be followers, who take no initiative and make no decisions. These people are also free of responsibility for the outcomes of their actions.

This presents a big problem for the organisation as a whole and followers as individuals:

- There is no synergy, in that the whole never becomes greater than the sum of its parts, because its parts do not work together;
- People do not take the initiative;
- There is little incentive for anyone to do anything “good” except follow orders; and
- There is little reason for people to not do “bad” things so long as they are within the letter of the law.

This is not going to make for a pleasant workplace, or an inspiring one.

It is also an issue for the leader

As the only one leading, the leader has to be perfect all the time. They have to not just right every time, but *seen* to be right every time. This is an impossible state to achieve: we are human and therefore fallible. To err is human, as the saying goes.

What’s more, the longer such a formal leader is in post, the greater the gap becomes between the leader and their followers. What can happen is that the leader becomes less tolerant of independent thought, and the followers become less capable of it. At this point, if the organisation is to survive ‘After the Leader’, it has to look seriously at succession planning. In such an organisation, succession planning must be the responsibility of the leader, otherwise it is likely to be interpreted as mutiny.

That, in itself, is likely to be a problem, as the leader will often look for someone who will ‘carry on their legacy’, rather than someone to take the organisation forward in a new direction, responding to current issues and needs.

History, unfortunately, shows time and again that:

- Families with a commanding father or mother are often at least slightly dysfunctional;
- Nations with a cult of personality around a single “great helmsman” tend to suffer in the long run; and
- Companies ruled by the iron hand of their founder are lost when the founder dies or is shown to have had feet of clay.

This kind of leadership simply does not work

The lesson is obvious: anyone stepping into a leadership position needs a different model of leadership.



MODERN IDEAS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Fredrik Arnander, in his 2013 book *We Are All Leaders*, suggested a different approach. He believes that we are all leaders, not by virtue of position, but by virtue of our mindsets. In other words, everyone has a responsibility to step up when necessary.

Arnander believed that this 'empowerment' was vital to build organisations that would succeed in the modern world. However, it is also essential to those within the organisation.

A Nigerian journalist, Bamidele Ademola-Olateju, put the idea of leadership succinctly in an article:

“A leader goes in the front, leads the way and by his actions; people follow.”

She contrasted this with a “ruler” who rules by the use of their power and authority, backing this up if necessary with force. Ademola-Olateju was talking about leaders and rulers in a national sense, but the same can be said for people at the top of any organisation, be it political, commercial or even religious.

The *quid pro quo* of leadership, then, is that leaders must have followers, and they must be following out of choice.

Returning to the idea of 'achieving greatness', a leader may rise to a state where people follow them for many years and through various incarnations. A fine example is the late Nelson Mandela, who moved from personal commitment through small scale political activism and national presidency to world statesmanship. Mandela embodied a vision and commitment for many years. He also preferred to think of a leader as leading from behind.

“It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership.”

Nelson Mandela

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