

Who's In Charge Here?

Stephen R Balzac

"She doesn't know how to lead!"

"Clearly, we picked the wrong person when we brought him on as CEO. He's just not a leader!"

"We don't need a leader. We're all equals."

These are all comments I've heard from Boards of Directors, senior management teams, even groups of college students. Okay, to be fair, college students don't refer to any of their number as a CEO, but otherwise the sentiment is the same. In each case, the first reaction of the group to any difficulties or controversy is to accuse the leader of being unable to lead. The groups with no leader do avoid that problem, but at the cost of not actually managing to get anything done. Sooner or later, a leader emerges, whether or not openly acknowledged.

Fundamentally, the problem with effective leadership is that most people have no idea what an effective leader looks like or how an effective leader actually leads. I am told over and over by managers, board members, and the like, that what the leader really needs to do is stand up and tell everyone to shut up and do as they are told. Of course, should the leader actually do that, those same people are the first to scream that they are having their opinions ignored. What they really mean is that they want the

leader to tell everyone else to shut up and let them speak.

I worked with one company that fired a team leader because the CEO didn't see that he was contributing anything. He seemed to spend all day doing nothing at all. Once he was gone, though, it became painfully obvious to the company that he was doing far

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more than nothing. By the time the CEO accepted that he'd made a mistake it was too late to get the team lead back.

The image of the leader as the person who tells everyone what to do, approves all decisions, and controls all aspects of the group has just enough truth in it to be dangerous. When a group is first assembled, there is frequently sufficient uncertainty about the goals of the group and about how the members all fit in that they are



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quite happy to have a certain amount of very directive leadership. Indeed, a leader can get away with quite a bit at this point, in large part because the members of the team don't yet actually care all that much about the team's goals.

At this point, the leader needs to be helping the members of the team build a sense of team spirit and team identity. That means getting to know one another and appreciate each other as individuals, not necessarily for what they bring to the team. As paradoxical as it may appear, you build the team by not focusing on the team. Instead, you focus on the individuals by building a strong foundation of trust and camaraderie. People want to be appreciated for who they are, not just for the skills they bring to the

table. The more team members can celebrate each others accomplishments, whether those accomplishments are work related or not, the more likely that team will be successful. That level of cohesion and trust does not come about through telling people what to do.

The toughest moment for the leader is when people start to care. Now that they care, they will actively work to bring about the success of the team, which is where things become challenging for the leader. When they didn't care, they accepted the leader's directives with little question. Now that they care, they want to bring their own perspectives, ideas, thoughts, and approaches into the mix. That means that many of them will start to question the leader, argue, and potentially become confrontational. Should the leader respond by squashing the apparent dissent, he also squashes the nascent sense of caring about the team and the company. Instead, the leader needs to slow down, invite opinion, and explain his actions and reasoning. The leader must be open to making changes if someone comes up with a better idea of how to do things. Otherwise, the leader is not fully taking advantage of the resources

available to him: the eyes, ears, hands, and brains of his team. Unfortunately, this team strengthening behavior is all too often seen as weakness by many people, including the leaders themselves. As a result, they refuse to do it, and thus limit the capabilities of their team.

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The goal of the leader must be to create a team that is more capable than any individual member of the team. Otherwise, why bother having a team in the first place? By building up a sense of team identity, trust, and appreciation for one another amongst the members, each person will be free to ask for and receive help from one another. As MIT's Ed Schein points out, it is only when each person, including the leader, feels that they can accept and give help freely that the team has the potential to become

stronger than any individual member. It is only through the asking and giving of help that the team can determine which member or coalition of members are best suited to solving any particular problem that comes up.

Thus, we come full circle. This process of mutual helping contradicts the image many people have of leaders. Rather than working to build up their teams, far too many so-called leaders act like the leaders they see on television or in movies. Others do not even seek leadership roles because they believe that being a leader means acting in ways that they find repugnant. If they do seek leadership roles, they may be ignored by team members who have bought into the fictional construct of the leader.

The leader who has to constantly tell people what to do is not doing a good job of leading. The leader who has to get out of the way so that his team doesn't run over him in their rush to accomplish the goals of the team is the true successful leader. What sort of leaders do you have in your organization?

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