

LEADERSHIP

PARADIGM CHANGE

Organizations today thrive on relationships. And most relationships are guided by the interactions among people. Guidance involves being lead and that is how the importance of leadership is connected with organizations achieving long term success. WIKIPEDIA, the free encyclopedia defines leadership as: “the process of social influence in which one person is able to enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.”

A definition more inclusive of followers comes from Alan Keith of Genentech who said “Leadership is ultimately about creating a way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen.” In order to continue performing and making profits, organizations need a vision and a mission. Leaders define the mission and the vision statements so that the organizational teams are well aware of the shared goals which would in turn ensure that their motivation is maintained at the appropriate level conducive to organizational performance and growth.

In the absence of adequate leadership at the helm, most organizations would just continue to exist, and may border on extinction. Whereas a strong leadership existence would result in high performing teams while at the same time ensuring that the success rate is maintained over a longer period of time.

Changing Face of Leadership

Recent studies in the field of management, particularly related to leadership, indicate that there are dramatic changes happening in how people in organizations perceive a leader and leadership. Gone are the days when a leader is recognized by the glow in his face or the charisma he displays. It is no longer a mandatory trait that a leader exudes power from his face. Organizations today observe that ordinary individuals also demonstrate strong leadership traits and are able to drive teams towards achievement. A leader is no longer expected to have that ‘larger-than-life,’ flamboyant behaviour. It is also a widely observed phenomenon that it is not just the individuals at the top level who play leadership roles there are many others down the hierarchy; who demonstrate the ability and the keenness to lead teams and nurture team spirit.

Another characteristic that is being accepted by the majority of organizations is that leaders need not be born. Even the shop-floor supervisor or the front-line executive could instill a vision in their colleagues and subordinates and help them share a common goal.

Furthermore, the understanding that leaders do not coerce others to do work, but achieve results through developing a shared vision and communicating it to them while inducing the passion and commitment. Commitment is also seen as one of the important trends that stands out in most surveys done on leadership during the last decade.

Leaders today must outline for their teams what needs to be done, and then focus on equipping the team members with the right knowledge, skills and attitude and getting their buy-in to do it. Employees at all levels of the organization are increasingly being demanded to demonstrate the capacity to lead to ensure that the organization stays abreast of changing times.

Leader vs. Manager

A clear distinction between the manager and the leader has emerged in the last few years and it has been impacting the functioning of organizations and the way they perceive leadership. While leaders are found to get things done by leading the followers, managers are still found to do so by controlling the team members and by wielding the power they derive by virtue of the position they hold in the organizational hierarchy. That is the reason why it is known today that “leaders have followers while managers have subordinates.”

Organizations have started recognizing leaders by the way they use personal charisma. The undeniable fact that someone who uses formal authority to control and coerce the team members is just a manager and not a leader, is glaringly evident in the opinion of most management groups. Individuals who effectively lead teams are found to have the capacity to visualize long-term vision while those who focus on short-term tasks and goals get left behind.

Respondents in leadership surveys revealed that they are more excited and committed to an individual who can lay down clear direction for the team and the organization but are uninspired by others who are more inclined towards getting involved in planning details and implementing processes. The larger goal and the excitement is found to create a sense of achievement among the team members, which drives them towards the organizational goals and objectives and creates a perpetual momentum. In contrast, individuals who are known to use the “carrot and stick” approach – using incentives and rewards to keep the team motivated are not looked upon as leaders, but are considered to be just another employee in the organizational hierarchy.

It is also agreed by the majority of the participants in most of the leadership surveys conducted over the last decade, that they find it easy to accept as their leader someone who is people-focused, rather than someone else who is task-focused.

Employees in any industry are influenced easily by a leader who is seeking risk, always looking for new avenues and pastures to leave his mark, rather than the manager who is known to just seek comfort and the assurance of getting the work done in time as per the job requirements.

Emerging Styles

Based on the manner in which the leader interacts and guides the team towards achievement of the organizational goals and objectives, his style is perceived by the team members.

It is found that more and more executive leaders are now inclined towards shifting from a Controlling Style to an Empowering Style. In jobs where routine is an inbuilt process, leaders are found to make the most of decisions, letting employees focus on the task at hand.

Issuing crystal clear instructions in a manner that is easily comprehended and implemented by the team members has become the highest parameter demanded of the executive leader in such situations. The fact that such an approach is not universally applicable has been proven to be undeniable in the form of high absenteeism and employee turnover in situations where employees were averse to an autocratic approach by the leader. Results have shown that employees remained disgruntled and unwilling to cooperate in situations where the leader coerced them to do things and was rigid, not willing to provide an opportunity for the team members to voice out their opinions.

In other job roles that involved working with machinery and toxic substances and high-risk activities, employees are found to look up to the executive leader to provide them with a precise set of rules, systems and procedures and processes to ensure smooth and error-free productivity. Appreciation by the leader is found to encourage the team members for doing things by the book in typical jobs. A startling fact that emerged is that in due course of time, due to the lack of encouragement for creativity and innovation, employees fall in to a routine, risking stagnancy and becoming resistant to change.

A study done on the reasons for the sudden collapse of an organization revealed that the primary reason was the separation of an executive leader who could influence and energize the teams through his personal charisma and enthusiasm. Lack of a right source of leadership to which the employees could look up to has led to the undesired consequence.

While realizing the importance of such a leadership, today organizations also are becoming aware of the threat they face when they become overly dependent on such executive leaders who believe in oneself and give more importance to one's own abilities rather than believing in the team's synergy.

More preferred scenarios are found to be those where the leader is open to receive inputs from the team members, encourage them to come out with new ideas, listen to them with due importance, while the obligation of making the final decision rests with the leader himself.

The majority of employees at all levels of the organization are found to be biased towards such an approach and accept that it keeps them motivated because they are given a chance to voice out their opinions - and would therefore tend to have a higher level of job satisfaction.

One hurdle though, identified by top management to such an approach, is the amount of time involved due to the interactions and thought-sharing process among the leader and the team members. So, it may not be suitable for assignments that need to be completed under tight deadlines, but would definitely suit others where synergy is more important than speed.

With the rapidly changing industry scenario and the trend toward virtual teams, there are newer and newer demands being put on the leader to continue leading the teams toward the achievement of the organizational goals and objectives.

With the information technology era and the concept of telecommuting slowly creeping in to all types of industry verticals, “Laissez-faire” is becoming the word of the game.

“Laissez-faire,” a French phrase means “let it be.”

Team leaders and project managers are becoming increasingly oriented toward letting team members work independently on their own and just focusing on monitoring the outcomes. This kind of approach is found to work well with teams that are highly skilled and experienced and do not need any external supervision.

In depth analyses also have started revealing that leaders are found to resort to such an approach in situations where they are actually not able to exert enough control and supervision over the team members.

Achievement of team tasks has always been the highest demand put on the leader, yet studies reveal that it is not the highest priority for some of the executive leaders.

A category of leaders are found to give more importance on establishing and maintaining good relations among the team members, and hence, tend to give lesser importance to the completion of the job.

Though this approach is observed to result in more cohesive teams that practice good collaboration, teams headed by such leadership are often found to fail in the achievement of the goals and objectives.

On the other hand, there are also another category of leaders who are highly focused on only one goal:

Getting the job done.

Such leaders are known to clearly define the roles and responsibilities and put in place a well defined set of processes, systems, structure and plans.

However, incidents have been observed where it has been resulting in lack of enough motivation on the part of the team members and the leader is getting to be seen as being autocratic.

Successful leaders are found to be able to have the prudence to differentiate between various approaches available for them and decide upon the right approach taking into consideration various factors as follows:

- The level of experience and the skill set of the team members
- The nature of the work involved and the demands of the job
- The organizational constraints in terms of the environmental conditions and responsiveness to change
- A preference/comfort level with a particular style

In fact, organizations today consider an effective leader as one who is able to practice various leadership styles, depending on the situation and the team with whom he is supposed to get things done, by adapting to the situations.

The Empowering Leader

Current day organizations look for leaders who can empower teams and not control. So, what factors differentiate these two categories of leaders?

A summary of findings through hundreds of researches on leadership over the last couple of years indicates that the set of qualities expected of an empowering leader are as follows:

- a. The empowering leader has a vision and the ability to develop it as a shared vision for the entire team. He is driven by a strong motivation and passion for the shared vision.
- b. The empowering leader is able to establish high levels of rapport and trust among the team members and is able to influence them to achieve the organizational goals and objectives.
- c. The empowering leader avoids controlling and coercing the team members and is able to induce a high degree of enthusiasm and zeal in the team members toward the committed goals.
- d. The empowering leader believes in his team members and demonstrates a positive, nurturing quality in all his interactions which results in a work atmosphere that is more conducive to synergy and achievement.
- e. The empowering leader is able to take charge of the needs and aspirations of the team members and ultimately shape the organizational climate and growth as well.

Failing Teams

Failure of a team is linked to the lack of adequate alignment of individual goals with the team goals /organizational goals.

Successful leaders are found to ensure that teams function cohesively, through a strong set of shared goals. It is the responsibility of the leader to instill this concept of a shared goal in the team members and that requires the leader to be able to play various roles.

Substantial evidence exists to prove that successful teams are those where the team members are clear about what is to be achieved and why it has to be achieved.

Team members have always expected from the leader, inputs that are vital for performance: the planning process, the decision making process and the process of interaction with each other.

Team members also rely on the leader to establish appropriate climate – the way the team members communicate with each other and the extent to which they are enthusiastic and confident of utilizing the support from the leader and other members to continue performing.

Each of these elements depends on numerous underlying processes and behaviors. For example, task depends on the vision and purpose, roles and responsibilities, objectives and the level of commitment of each of the team members.

Likewise, the process depends on parameters like decision making and problem solving approaches used, planning process and the level of coordination among the team members.

The term climate here refers to the amount of trust, empowerment and energy levels internally in the team.

Key Roles Being Demanded of a Leader

When asked to define the kind of individuals that employees find it easy to accept as leaders, their responses often relate to various roles that the leader is able to fulfill.

1. The leader is seen as a **VISIONARY**.

In order to cope with the changing environment conditions, the organization also should be able to be well prepared in advance, which needs a leader with a strong vision. He is expected to look to the future, promote futuristic thinking and be able to rejuvenate the energy and enthusiasm levels in the team members.

2. The leader is supposed to be a **MANAGER**.

It is not enough if the leader is able to keep the team motivated – he is also expected to carry out all the responsibilities expected of a manager, including planning, organizing, scheduling, directing and coordinating as well.

3. The leader is looked upon as an **EDUCATOR**.

Today organizations are under a constant state of change – the ever growing demands of the environment put pressure on the team members to update themselves as per the requirements.

The majority of work scenarios indicate that often the team members look upon the leader to identify areas for improvement with respect to each of the members of the team on knowledge, skills and abilities and to transfer the information and his personal experience through structured interactions, workshops and discussion sessions.

4. The leader is today perceived to be a **COACH / CHANGE AGENT**.

Every member of the team in the organizational context has a different set of needs and may require different levels of assistance and guidance.

One of the striking revelations of recent opinion polls is that people in organizations consider their leader to be someone who can hand-hold any team member who is not able to cope with the demands of the situation and help him to overcome difficult circumstances. This particular expectation has been demanding that the leader develop a strong rapport that builds trust in the minds of the team members.

5. Employees find it easy to accept a good **DECISION MAKER** as their leader.

Another differentiating factor between ordinary individuals and someone who has the potential to become an effective leader is observed to be the ability to make the right decisions at the right time.

Team members often depend on the leader to navigate the group toward appropriate goals and this requires him to demonstrate expertise in decision making and problem solving.

Can You Lead From the BALCONY?

Over the last couple of years, large corporations have come into existence and multinationals are the buzzword today.

The seemingly large geographical spread and huge teams required to coordinate across undeniable chasms of personal rapport demand that the leader learn to operate across boundaries and equip himself with the appropriate approach to bridge the gaps.

Lack of direct physical interaction, absence of body language cues and intense efforts towards individualism are the challenges the modern leader is faced with in multinational corporations.

To be able to continue leading the team and maintain a steady level of performance, the leader should not be someone who makes a decision on the fly, without even considering all inputs from his team members. He should be able to make quick decisions, but not hasty ones, and should be analytical so that he can consider all possible outcomes in order to choose the most appropriate one for the situation.

In addition to being able to play all the five roles with ease and expertise, the leader is also bound to be able to balance other various roles he is expected to play.

Sometimes, the leader is also needed to detach himself from the personal relationships he has with the team members and suggest a decision that's appropriate in the interests of the team. Similarly, at times he might be needed to step away from his involvement with the team and take a bird's eye view of the situation be able to take an unbiased decision or action.

Further, if a leader involves himself too much in the day to day activities of the team members, then also it could lead to a hijacking of the normal functioning of the team members and may actually short-circuit their performance. This process of leading the team from a higher perspective is often termed as "Leading from the balcony."

An in depth assessment and understanding of the stage through which his team is passing through is also essential for the leader in his desire to provide the right leadership.

This understanding helps him to keep track of what is happening in the team, why it is happening and what he can do next to keep the team on the desired road to success.

Understanding TEAM Requirements

Innovative times need innovative approaches. Leaders are faced with the dilemma of accurately assessing the requirements of their teams. This requires them to have a thorough understanding of how teams get formed and how they grow to perform.

During the initial stages of putting the team together, the leaders are facing chaos due to the fact that members hardly know each other and their roles and responsibilities.

Even the most successful leader still is found to grapple with this kind of a situation when they are confronted with taking over a new team.

Leaders are expected to focus on developing a positive work environment by clarifying roles and responsibilities and establishing a structure that leads to group building and commitment.

As members get to know each other and the roles become clearer, it is found that the issues related to power and control crop up. Organizations need the leader to use their coaching skills to encourage positive communication and manage conflicts.

Leaders should also invite input and feedback from the team members. While many employees are getting into the role of a leader by managing conflict and establishing ground rules, there still is a strong demand on the team leader to help the team members develop their most effective working style, and by sharing their leadership with them, becoming more of a facilitator and enabler.

While teams in organizations today are concerned with their internal channels of interaction, the organization has a growing concern of interaction among teams.

A detailed analysis of high performing teams reveals that shared goals, open communication channels, high levels of trust and respect, mutual coordination for problem solving and dealing with daily tasks are critical success factors.

To summarize, the emerging role of the leader in today's organization context demands him to be proficient in each of the following areas:

1. A thorough understanding of his or her own personal strengths and weaknesses as a leader.
2. A self assessment of their ability to fulfill the demands of various roles.
3. Improvement plans for self with respect to areas like defining priorities and managing time.
4. Ability to handle situations or behavior that does not meet expectations.
5. Clarity as to where to draw the line with respect to the performance deficiencies of the team members.
6. Understanding of the implications of a high-performance team and how it differs from a traditional team.
7. The stage in which a team is present and the development process it needs to undergo.
8. Ways to empower the team members for success through practicing situational leadership style.