

Effective Leadership

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Abstract

The concept of leadership, and effective leadership, can best be examined with a clear understanding of the underlying definition of what a leader is. Once the term leader has been defined the idea of leadership, or of being a leader, can be examined independent of its success or failure or morale rights. For right or wrong, leadership is the ability to use a power that has been gained or granted to effect change in others. By extension, effective leadership is the use of leadership principles to effect positive change in individuals to have them perform to their full capabilities to reach stated end goals.

Effective Leadership

The role of leadership in today's world is no less important than leadership in any other era in human history; leaders and, in turn, leadership, have been required in every era. One could argue that leaders were, in fact, more important in the early history of mankind than they are now for the simple fact that it was leaders who were able to lead early humans into continued existence. Though there have always been leaders, the concept of an effective leader has likely changed through the course of history.

Early humans would have had a very simple measurement of successful leadership: the continued existence of the tribe. Future leaders might then have a slightly changed ideal thrust upon them: not only the continued existence of the tribe, but the successful *growth* of the tribe. Then, as tribes grew in size and began to interact with other tribes, successful leadership might then not only entail ensure an adequate food supply, but also ensuring an adequate arms supply to fend off a possible attack, all so the tribe can continue to grow. As tribes become towns, towns become cities, and society becomes complex, leaders must find new way to ensure that the base unit (tribe, city, nation, and so on) continues to exist and grow while now dealing with the complexities of millions of people and multiple, sometimes incompatible, desires. Not only is their conflict from without – from other tribes – but there may now also be conflict from within.

Of course, not all leaders are responsible for the well being of their followers; some are responsible for economic growth; some are responsible for infrastructure, or teaching. In today's world leaders are teachers, school principles, heads of unions, elected officials, parents, heads of civic associations, religious figures, and many more. Some are effective, yet some are not.

However, before attempting to truly determine what constitutes an *effective leader*, and hence

effective leadership, one must first more clearly define what a leader is. Once the term leader is understood, one can then undertake an examination of leadership, its qualities, and what makes some leadership effective, and some not.

A quick examination of online and library resources indicates that there are many discussions and opinions as to what constitutes *leadership*, but few in the way of what constitutes a *leader*. Even Plato, the originator of modern philosophy as we know it, defined a leader in terms of leadership qualities as to what a leader must do and how a leader must act:

- “Leaders must embrace true knowledge”
- “Leaders ... use the concept of truth and meaning as absolutes”
- “Leaders are called to a higher realm of intelligence and accountability” (thinkingleaders.com, 2010)

More recently, in 2010, David Rosch and Michelle Kusel also attempted to define the term leader in terms of leadership qualities: “Typically, charismatic and extroverted individuals at the top of an organizational hierarchy are classified as leaders. However, when challenged, we struggle to identify specific actions that illustrate leadership.” (Rosch, D., and Kusel, M. (2010), p. 29) Note the word typically in the definition, indicating that charisma and extroversion are not always requirements. Sports coaches do not necessarily require charisma to lead a team to victory. From a fictional standpoint, Morris Buttermaker, fictional head coach of the fictional Bad News Bears, had virtually no redeeming qualities whatsoever, but was still able to coach his team of ‘misfits’ to nearly winning the championship (Bad News Bears, 1976).

Bob Dunham provides a very effective definition of what a leader is: “In the common sense of our culture a leader is one who has power, who gathers power, and who exercises it **in a**

way that affects the futures of others.” (Dunham, 2012) (emphasis added) This definition is clear, concise, does not differentiate between likeable or unlikeable leaders, and does not differentiate between effective and non-effective leaders, such as those who effect others in a positive or a negative way. This definition also makes no attempt to identify the end goals of the leaders or the others who follow: they may have shared end-goals or they may not.

Leadership then, by extension, is the act or continued act of using and gaining power to affect the future of others. The act of leadership, and of leading, can be performed in any one of a number of ways. Again, one needs to only look at the literature on the subject of leadership to see that leadership studies cross all domains: baseball (Chao-Chien, 2010), the managerial boardroom (Vandewaerde, Voordeckers, Lambrechts, & Bammens, 2011), and even metallurgical enterprises (Vukovic, Ikonc, & Dobovick, 2011). Types of leadership, then, are wide and varied and dependent upon the situation at hand; leadership styles will be different depending on the situation or the people being led; even a literature review on the topic would be exhausting. *Effective leadership*, however, can very possibly not only be qualified, but also quantified.

By extending the current working definition of leading, effective leadership can be at least loosely defined as “the act or continued act of using and gathering power to cause others to create change or reach a desired end goal.” Again, this definition makes no attempt at moral dilemmas: Joseph Stalin may have been ruthless, but he embarked the Soviet Union on a course toward prosperity with lower taxes; Julius Caesar may have loved war too much, but he gained great amounts of new land for the Roman Empire; Morris Buttermaker may have not been a likeable man, but he led his baseball team to a near championship. Joseph Stalin’s leadership can be quantified a success by measuring his nation’s GDP – a rise in GDP could be considered a

success, while a drop would be a failure. Julius Caesar's success could be quantified through population growth and land growth; Morris Buttermaker's success can be quantified through his team's win/loss record and depth of victories through the playoffs.

In today's business climate, it could be argued that effective leadership in the corporate world could be quantified through stock price, various financial ratios, and net profit. On a macro scale that might even be true; however, on a micro scale the success of effective leadership is not so easily quantified. Instead, such questions as "Do your followers want to follow you, do they want to follow your decisions, and do they want to perform to their fullest capabilities due to your leadership?" must also be answered. Nahavandi (2012) and Blanchard (2010) both argue that encourage employees to want to perform to their fullest potential will not only benefit them as people but will also have a positive effect on the financial bottom line: essentially, a happy work place leads to a more successful workplace.

Effective leadership, then, in the corporate world, sees our working definition go through one final edit:

- Effective leadership is the use of gained power to promote positive changes in employee's behavior and attitude which will have a positive reflection in output, sales, and profits.

Again, this definition leaves the various types of leadership out of the equation but provides enough of a guideline that whatever type of leadership style is chosen, it should have a positive effect on employees. Blanchard states that 'high performing organizations' strive to become not only the provider of choice, but also the employer of choice (Blanchard, 2010, p. 4); that is, employees will want to work for the employer which, in turn, improves the organization

as a whole.

We can now finally come to a conclusion of what effective leadership is and its end goal: Effective leadership is the act of using power to effect positive change in others to encourage them to perform to their fullest potential to reach the desired end goals and improve the organization as a whole.

Personal Experience

I have had the fortune – or misfortune, as the case may be, of experiencing leadership styles from only one company. I started working for this company directly from college and have been there for the 14 years following.

At the beginning of my time there the management style could be considered ‘old school.’ Very shortly after my arrival the executive board felt they needed a more productive workforce; their decision was to require everyone to work an additional 4 hours per week, for a total of 44 hours per week, using the theory that the workforce would be 10% more productive by putting in 10% more hours. This did not necessarily work. I remember at that time morale began to plummet and, ultimately, the company lost a Class Action lawsuit over unpaid overtime.

Nonetheless the leadership style continued to stay in the realm of ‘traditional management.’ To cut costs (and thereby improve the ‘bottom line’) the size of the workforce was reduced and many positions were moved to low-cost centers overseas. The official explanation at the time was that our competitors were performing these changes, and we had to as well to stay competitive.

The company continued a tailspin in productivity: we lost skilled workers, replaced them with those who were not as well qualified, and continued to see our clients leave very unhappy.

Over the course of the last two years the entire executive board has been replaced. If I did not know better, I would say the new board has taken this very course. One of the first “all hands meetings” conducted by the new President saw him explain that this company would become the “service provider of choice” as well as the “employer of choice” for new employees. He is very open that there are tough choices to be made to return the company to profitability, and that there will be reductions in staff in business units that are no longer required, but ultimately the responsibility for change must come first from the executive board itself. They are promising transparency, good labor relations and actions taken to ensure that employees are well compensated, both financially and otherwise, for hard work and high skill sets. Other changes include identifying the most troubled contracts and making them better. We will see budget cuts to stem the bleeding, but they currently seem to be surgical in nature instead of clear-cutting. I am hopeful.

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