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Leadership

For two years, I have been studying leadership intensively as I pursue my masters in organizational leadership. Curious friends and colleagues ask me what I've learned. I would have to say that the biggest eye-opener has been that, while I have long been interested in leaders and leadership, have studied both, and have helped people learn to lead for years, I've been off the mark. However, I am far from alone, and it is no wonder. The leadership media, both academic and popular, can be confusing and disappointing, and some very well liked authors in the popular leadership press are just getting it wrong.

Defining Leadership

Read much on leadership, and you quickly recognize that few authors, whether research scholar or popular expert, tell us just what it is that they call leadership. Is this important? Joseph Rost, one of the foremost thinkers in the leadership field today says it is, and I have really come around to Rost's way of thinking. If we are to improve our understanding and practice of leadership, we must first agree on what leadership is, in other words to define leadership.

In his influential book *Leadership for the 21st Century*, Rost offers a definition that numerous scholars in the leadership field accept as foundational. According to Rost, Leadership is "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes."

While Rost has advanced the field toward an accepted definition, his still does not quite satisfy me. Consequently, I define leadership a process dependent on interactive, influence relationships between people who intend substantial changes reflecting their mutual purposes.

So what does all that mean? My definition includes six basic components:

1. First and uppermost, leadership is a process; not a person, not personality traits, not the behaviors of a leader; but a process that leaders and followers engage in together.

2. The essence of leadership lies in the process of influencing. For the purposes of this essay, let's say that influence means one person's actions designed to change another person's attitudes, beliefs, values, or behavior. Without influence we cannot exercise leadership.
3. The process of influencing cannot occur without relationships between people that make that influence possible. I use the term "interactive" in an attempt to conceptualize these influence relationships as being *mutual, reciprocal* and *multi-directional*. In other words, followers influence leaders, leaders influence followers, and peers influence each other.
4. The words "leader" and "follower" are conspicuous by their absence in my definition. I feel that specifically including the words leader and follower can erroneously imply fixed roles or fixed positions. In today's organizations, hierarchical structures have largely given way to team structures, in which there often exists more than one leader. More importantly, I firmly believe that in any one leadership relationship, followers become leaders and leaders become followers depending on the situation. So, in my definition of leadership, I just go with "people."
5. Leadership scholars widely accept that the purpose of leadership is to create and promote change, and that people involved in leadership are not just the subject of change, but also the driving force behind it. Some would go so far as to say that contemporary leadership is all about change seeking and change making and little more. That is why I include the intention of "substantial change" in my definition.
6. Like Rost, I include the idea of reflecting mutual purposes. In the leadership environment, at our best, we pursue what all parties want. At least, our pursuits should be in the interest of all parties, not just change desired by leader or the organization without regard for constituents.

Toward A “Grand Theory” of Leadership

Scholars tell us that we are entering a new era of human society, a “post-industrial age.” Researchers in the leadership studies field tell us that a changing society requires a changed perspective on leaders and leadership. In this brave, new post-industrial world, I believe the leader’s role will be to:

- ◆ Understand, create, maintain and, when necessary, destroy organizational culture.
- ◆ Serve as a symbol, or the symbolic head, of the organization.
- ◆ Establish vision (or direction), create focus, and common purpose.
- ◆ Build commitment for the vision (or direction).
- ◆ Create a sense of community or organization.
- ◆ Enable free choice and self-determination, what we commonly call “empowering people.”

There Is No Question Whether Leaders Are Born or Made

People’s traits contribute to their leadership capacity and are part of leadership. However, they are not essential to leadership, and neither is charisma. People can learn the processes and skills of leadership, and in this way, everyone may exercise leadership in a given situation if properly prepared and motivated. That is not to say that everyone will or can lead, but that leadership is accessible to all.

The Importance of Vision

In his book *Visionary Leadership*, renowned author and scholar Burt Nanus asserts, “There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long range success than an attractive, worthwhile and achievable vision of the future widely shared.” The leader of any effective organization must guide the organization to identify its collective vision. A compelling vision that is in the mutual interest of leaders and followers sets a common direction, empowers people and enables them. A common vision also helps people transcend their self-interest and focus on the common good.

The Role of Power

In the leadership environment, power is not inherently good or bad, but just part of the equation. Power is inherent in leadership relationships because leadership is a process of influence, and power provides

influence potential. People will only accept leadership if they have some reason to allow themselves to be influenced or to follow. A leader's potential to influence others, to give them a reason to follow, flows from the leader's base of power. The misuse of power can be controlling, leaving the follower with little choice, what we normally describe as coercion. However, power also enables leaders to influence others because the leader is trusted, revered, or because they are experts in their field.

In my experience, the relationships of power to influence, and influence to leadership represent concepts that are not well known among many people assigned to positions requiring leadership. It is sad to see people assigned to lead, but ineffective and frustrated because they simply do not understand what their base of power is or is not, and because they are attempting inappropriate styles of leadership for their circumstances.

The Distinction Between Leadership and Management

Management and leadership are two distinct, but complementary systems, both of which are necessary for organizational success. Each system has its own functions. Generally speaking, management is about coping with complexity and providing stability and predictability. Leadership is about vision and creating and coping with change.

The Influence of Organizational Culture

In the post-industrial era, successful leaders will understand the concept of organizational culture. Given our diversifying society and workforce, effective leaders will need to foster organizational cultures that overcome barriers to opportunity and empower people equally.

The Follower Continues to Emerge and Become Empowered

Followers or constituents are central to the process of leadership and the trend toward empowerment will continue and intensify. Given the changing nature of our society and of work, the influence relationships that we know as leadership will have to be mutual and multi-directional. In other words, leaders and followers will influence each other, and in many situations the follower will have as much influence as the leader. Increasingly, leaders and followers are situational roles more than fixed roles or fixed positions.

In our post-industrial, knowledge and technology driven society, a good leader helps and enables followers to:

- ◆ Develop judgment and initiative
- ◆ Grow and become better contributors
- ◆ Succeed without strong leadership
- ◆ Gain independence and become leaders themselves

Credibility May Just Be the Foundation of Leadership

In the last issue of Wildfire, I asserted that credibility is the foundation of leadership, and referenced James Kouzes and Barry Posner who, in their book *Credibility*, cite the results of five research studies to argue that credibility makes a difference and that people can easily distinguish between the behaviors of individuals who are credible and those who are not. People want to follow other people who can get the job done and demonstrate leadership expertise. Consequently, followers' perceptions of effectiveness bear on the leader's credibility, the followers' willingness to follow, and the leader's ability to lead.

Ethics Have a Role

Leadership represents a complex relationship between people and a moral or ethical activity. Healthy ethical relationships between leaders and followers are vital to effective leadership. In their books *Ethics: The Heart of Leadership* and *Ethical Dimensions of Leadership*, ethics scholars Joanne Ciulla, Rabindra Kanungo and Manuel Mendonca all contend that a person's understanding of leadership is seriously incomplete, if not distorted, if one does not consider the ethics or morality of leadership. Leaders are only truly effective when they are motivated unselfishly and by a concern for other people.

Biography

Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently completing a master's degree in organizational leadership. He can be reached at info@guidancegroup.org