

The Leadership Challenge

The dictionary on my desk defines leadership as: (1) the position or function of a leader; (2) the ability to lead; or (3) an act or instance of leading. I'd like to offer you a more practical definition of leadership in the business world: real leadership in business is the act of pulling your employees forward to a desired level of performance.

The most important word in that definition is "pulling." There's an old saying that you can't push a rope. I think the key to understanding real leadership lies in understanding that your employees—individually and collectively—are very much like that rope. Each one has a different personality and different attitudes; each one has different job responsibilities; each one may have a different view of what's important and what's not important in the operation of your business. They are bound together to some degree by a common workplace...but that doesn't make it any easier to "push" them along.

Now, get yourself a piece of rope and try pulling on it. Do you see how it's a lot easier to get it to go where you want it to go?

Management Vs. Leadership

There's another old saying which states that "any idiot can be a manager, but it takes something special to be a leader." If there's truth in that statement (and I bet you agree that there is), what's the difference between management and leadership?

I think it's simply that "manager" is a title, while "leader" is an attitude. But the two categories are definitely interrelated. The most effective managers are leaders as well. And the leaders who ultimately enjoy the greatest success have strong management skills to support their leadership qualities.

A lot has been written about various management and leadership "styles." My feeling is that "leadership" simply represents the best possible management style. But how about leadership styles?

Let's start with the understanding that leaders are made, not born. You don't have to come from some specific gene pool to be an effective leader. You don't need any special training, either. There are a number of ways to adopt a leadership attitude and add "leadership" to your "management" skills.

The Quiet Leader

The most comfortable leadership style for many people is that of the "quiet leader." At the other end of the spectrum is the "cheerleader," and we'll talk about that style in a moment. The quietest leader is the one who leads purely by example—who may not have the confidence to take on a "rah-rah" leadership personality.

The most important consideration for a quiet leader is consistency in the example he or she provides. A quiet leader in business is *always* pleasant to customers; *always* fair with employees and suppliers; *always* respectful of the customer's concerns. A quiet leader *always* takes care of the little details. A quiet leader *never* says anything derogatory about a customer—or a supplier or an employee—in the presence of an employee. The leadership message projected is *I want you to watch the way I work...the way I deal with customers, suppliers, and other employees...and I want you to measure up to my standards!*

The quiet leadership style works best with a well-documented management structure: written job descriptions, an emphasis on training, and defined standards of behavior and performance. The strategy of placing the "rules of the game" in writing, and then constantly reinforcing those rules by the owner's example, has proven to be a very effective combination of management and leadership.

The Visionary Leader

Another common leadership style among entrepreneurial business people is that of the "visionary leader." This type of leader is always focused on what he/she wants the company to be. That may involve sales growth, productivity improvement and profit growth, or even a major transitional change like the ones so many companies are faced with as significant changes occur within their industries and markets. A visionary leader rewards performance which supports his/her vision—and sits down for a serious conversation with any employee whose performance does not! The leadership message projected is *I know where we're going...and I want you to go there with me...but you have to help!*

A visionary leader gains support from employees by explaining the "why" behind his/her instructions. It's never "Do this!" or "Don't do that!" It's "Do this (or don't do that) because..."

The visionary leadership style works best when the vision is clearly understood...by both the leader and the employees! Rules and procedures can be less formal because the vision provides the overall framework for making “on-the-spot” decisions.

The Cheerleader

The most common stereotype of a leader might be the person who leads through raw enthusiasm. This type of leader makes work fun, and his/her energy and enjoyment in the work is often strong enough to carry employees along for the ride. The “cheerleader” is focused on morale, working on the assumption that happy employees will do good work leading to happy customers and satisfactory sales and profit levels. The “cheerleader” might reward the entire staff when things are going well, and might overlook individual employee failings or problems while things are going well. The leadership message projected is *we’re all in this together...let’s all have fun...and let’s get the job done!*

The cheerleader style works best with a group of employees who are themselves eager and enthusiastic. Rules and procedures can be fairly informal because the cheerleader is never far from the action, and always available to answer a “how-should-we-do-this” question.

Bottom Line

There are certainly other variations of leadership style. The style you use—or choose—is not as important as simply accepting the leadership role for your company. For some business owners and managers, that has come easily. For others, it continues to be a struggle.

Unfortunately, too many business owners and managers seem to substitute one of the far extremes of management style for true leadership. They operate either with suffocatingly rigid rules and regulations, or with a complete absence of management control. In either case, it might be said that these people are attempting to lead from behind.

It doesn’t work that way. It *can’t* work that way. The leader’s place is at the front, where he or she can be seen in action. Whether you do it quietly, or with a “rah-rah” cheerleader style, the essence of leadership is leading by vision and example. If you do that well, others—your employees—will follow you. You’ll pull them along to the highest possible level of performance...and your business will benefit from the results.