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The Importance of Leadership

Leaders are those who do the right thing and managers are those who do things right, according to Warren Bennis, widely known as the progenitor of modern leadership concepts. Do we live and act like we know the difference between a leader and a manager? In everyday activities when urgent matters and routines dominate the agenda, most of us try to do things right, typically without reflecting much, not least because reflection, especially self-reflection, is not so popular in business worlds. For many, John Kotter made the first clear discrimination between leadership and management in the context of change management. In his opinion a manager is more likely an organisational administrator, whereas a leader has visions about where to arrive and how to get there. Management aims for perfect and optimised planning, organising and controlling. Leadership inspires, motivates and creates innovation, meaning and change.

People Want Coherent Leaders With Firm Personal Integrity

There are some basic qualities of good leadership most of us can relate to. In an ideal situation, a good leader is someone we trust, particularly in times of change. When we as followers are asked for commitment we also want to see a coherent leader with firm personal integrity. This simple reflection is very important when it comes to the question of how a leader can influence people to follow his/her vision or goal. If I am in a leading position, do colleagues, co-workers, team and staff members trust my expertise and habits? Or is it just business hierarchy, position and role that make followers obey? We all know about educational and organisational structures that sometimes generate individual careers, competition and rivalry. With this in mind, good leadership has to be concerned about the quality of reliability, commitment and trust as well as the quality of communication, cooperation and outcome.

1. Becoming a Good Leader Needs Reliability, Commitment and Trust

As team members and followers, we expect a good leader to be someone we can rely on. We want to see words and action to be congruent and an expression of the leader's own commitment. As a leader we have to be able to develop congruent and reliable leadership habits. If we demand commitment from others without acting appropriately ourselves, trust in our leadership will be weak. A direct result of reliable leadership habits and commitment is trust in the leader's decisions.

2. Becoming a Good Leader Needs Communication, Cooperation and Outcome

A good leader makes people feel their value by communication. Good leadership has nothing in common with anonymous functional communication. It gives the impression of being concerned with people and followers in everyday routines as well as performing organisational or functional tasks. This kind of related communication is needed when we want to influence our team and staff members effectively towards commitment and enhanced cooperation. It works through listening and asking questions not just by telling. People always perceive this communication habit positively because it generates valuation, appraisal, meaning and motivation. Meaningful communication always ends up in enhanced cooperativeness and outcome. Becoming a good leader is about developing people skills and communication habits that facilitate valuation, appraisal and meaning.

3. Becoming a Good Leader Needs Enhanced Perception and Reflection

Even though the need for leadership skills is deemed important, the challenge is how and when to reflect and establish effective habits when urgent issues dominate the agenda and cut off change processes. Therefore, to most of us, leadership means focusing on those we lead, not looking into the mirror of self-reflection. Understanding the importance of self-awareness and reflection is one thing, acquiring a leadership habit is another. Thus, becoming a good leader is not only a matter of information and knowledge, rather a matter of how we spend our time between acting as an individual contributor, manager of tasks and leader of people.

Nicole Truckenbrodt interviewed 52 leaders of top and middle management levels in different companies to evaluate their leadership skills in a self-assessment format. All the interviewed managers said that reflection skills are most essential to be a good leader but they don't have time for it. Also 100 percent of those interviewed mentioned that reflection skills only work effectively when there is some defined time provided on a regular basis to calm down their pace. They can't do that either. Another principle of good leadership deals with our perception according to the interviewed managers. Good perception skills should sense leadership tasks and challenges by listening carefully to team and staff members as well as recognising one's own internal reactions. Perception training can be an effective way of enhancing leadership skills. Most of those interviewed said they couldn't implement that either, because they are educated into an academic or business world where non-scientific subjects and soft skills are not taken seriously. This survey brings up questions of working place reality into the challenge of how to become a good leader.

Sir John Whitmore, an author and expert speaker on leadership, highlights these basic questions:

- What are we leading people towards?
- What are the obstacles in my/our organisational and personal reality?

- What are my real options to develop good leadership habits?
- When and where will I listen and talk to people?
- When can I find time to reflect on personal and organisational issues, like enhancing the courage to perceive and talk about our states of mind?

4. Developing Good Leadership Habits Means Prioritisation

Understanding that acquiring good leadership habits requires training in awareness, perception, reflection and people skills, as well as willingness and time management to implement all this into daily routines we now face the necessity of prioritisation. According to Stephen Covey (1989), prioritisation means discriminating between urgent and important, non-urgent and non-important activities. For many of us, training and implementing these kinds of leadership habits into daily business life is neither urgent nor important. What if becoming a good leader really means identifying leadership skills as important, even on a par with urgent issues, so that organising its training and implementation takes place within a serious time management strategy?

Conclusion

Ideal leadership is based on reliability, commitment and trust, as well as meaningful communication to enhance cooperation and outcome. Managers and leaders themselves identify good leadership as being carried by perception, reflection and people skills. To train and implement this in terms of habits and routine we need commitment and time. Most of us feel the importance of leadership especially in times of change, whereas the achievement of becoming a good leader seems to be unrealistic within the context of time lacking and different prioritisations.

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