

## Leadership in a Global Context

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Scholars and organizational participants have regarded leadership as the most important, most studied, and least understood variable in the complex world of organizational dynamics in business, government, religion, military, education, family, or voluntary organizations. Considering the pervasive role of leadership, the increasing visibility and public scrutiny of leaders, the short tenure of so many leaders in the business sector, and the call in the public media for *real leaders* to step forward, reexamining this mystical topic seems appropriate.

While my primary focus is about leadership in general, I will cite examples from different contexts, especially the Middle East. Personal experience as a visiting professor and consultant with educational, governmental and business organizations in Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt provides this perspective. Leaders are changing frequently in that part of the world, and the conditions under which they must lead are always challenging.

As we explore the definition, meaning, and application of leadership concepts, it is important to note that I am not proposing a universal set of leadership principles. Different strategies and techniques, which may be appropriate in one context and not in another, exist. Different leaders successfully use very different approaches in similar situations. Yet other examples of people using the same approach in different settings may result in failures.

The reasons for this difference of outcomes are simple, even if the solution is complex. Situations, people, culture, tasks, skills, and goals are all very diverse; and the right match-up of leadership behavior with the situation involves a subtle multivariate matrix. Perspectives that provide a different way of thinking about the phenomenon and may help in understanding leadership and in accepting responsibility for becoming better leaders include the following framework considerations:

### Leadership Is about People

A classic cartoon portrays an executive coming home after a hard and discouraging day. Clearly frustrated with lack of performance by the employees of the organization, he says, "I've fired them all, all 2,437 of them. I'm gonna go it alone." I have found this to be the attitude of too many managers

and people in general—the idea that they would have a wonderful life if it just were not for the people. Some professors say, "Being a university professor would be a great job if it were not for the students."

Both professors and managers are missing something very simple and very critical in that analysis. Missing is what teaching and leadership are all about—developing people. Such people also say, "If you want a job done right, do it yourself." "Doing it alone" is a formula for failure for any leader. The people are the *only* reason for the job. That's what leaders do—they work with, support, inspire and develop people. You don't lead money or machines. You *manage* these things, but you *lead* people.

King Hussein of Jordan illustrated this point. His wife, Queen Noor, was asked to explain the leadership secret of the King. She answered, "His Majesty knows all the important people; but he also knows all the unimportant people." By "unimportant" she meant those who were not in *formal* positions of power or influence. Knowing the important people is an obvious characteristic of successful leaders, but knowing and relating to the people who are not so visible is a special art that creates enormous power.

### Leadership Is Action

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy asks Linus what love is. After Linus gives a careful theoretical definition, Lucy says, "On paper he's great." Many people are great leaders on paper but are not very good on the ground—not very good in dealing with real humans; they're only good in talking and writing about leadership. When I was an Army officer in Germany many years ago, we had a young lieutenant who was "gung-ho" and really looked the part. The commander writing his efficiency report said, "Lieutenant Black is an exceptional officer. He has all the characteristics of a good leader; his only problem is that he can't get the troops to do what he wants them to do." What the commander was really saying, of course, is that the lieutenant only *looked* good (his uniform was clean and pressed, his shoes shined, and his hair cut); but he did not know how to support or influence members of his platoon. Be suspicious of those who offer a facade, who look the part or talk a good line without the substance. The only value, the only test of leadership is what



happens on the ground—what happens to the people—how their values are changed, how their behavior is influenced, and how results are obtained.

### **Leadership Is Looking at Things from Many Perspectives—Developing New Paradigms**

Most people look at life from their own perspective. Leaders must make an effort to understand the perspectives of those who are in need of sensitive and effective leadership. Leaders seldom understand completely how others see things—but having multiple perspectives allows the leader to approximate such a view. If people feel the leader is really trying to see things from their perspective, they will be more willing to listen and follow.

To understand more, visualize a pyramid to represent an organization. Normally the pyramid has the apex at the top, as in an organization chart with the boss at the top. But, looking at the pyramid with the apex at the bottom rather than the top suggests a different paradigm that can be instructive. With the apex at the top, the leader is seen as in a command-and-control position with respect to the rest of the organization. While control is not always bad, of course, an alternate leadership-relationship dimension illustrates how powerful top-down control can be. With the apex at the bottom, the leader is seen supporting the organization rather than controlling from the top.

In this configuration, the leader's role is to understand the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of the people and then take whatever action is needed to prepare the people to accomplish the task. Such understanding may include training, disciplining, changing rewards, providing information, giving encouragement, and restructuring the organization. The point is simply to align the various aspects of the organization in order to be more effective. Often the view from the bottom is much more helpful than the view from the top in attaining this insight.

While I am not suggesting we do away with management, I am suggesting we emphasize leadership. We need both in the appropriate functions. Controlling (managing) money, inventory, facilities, information, etc., is crucial; but, at the same time, there is a greater need to support and develop people (leadership) to become managers.

### **Leadership Is Not for the Purpose of Increasing Personal Power**

While personal power may help people and organizations become more effective, such power needs to be seen as a means, not as a personal end. Personal power is often a tempting leadership strategy to see just how much you can influence others to agree with you or to obey you. Often this is only a test of the leader's power at the expense of the needs of the people or organization. Simply imposing your will is usually evidence of leadership failure. And, if you have to resort to violence in order to save the organization (such as police action or war), you must ask where leadership failed. Who created the situation where human dignity was not respected or where people were exploited? When an evil leader abuses people, force against that leader must be used in order to restore justice and freedom. But, somewhere leadership failed.

In the fragile peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians, when negotiations go well, we talk about the vision and courage of leaders. On the other hand, when the process fails, we blame the leaders—so often we impute that the leaders are not serving the best interest of their people.

Leadership is not a game on an organizational playground. So often the personal competition for position influences leaders to try to win even at the expense of organizational performance. Leaders rationalize that they are serving the organization's best interest, but the motive is more likely the arrogance of power.

### **Leadership Is Personal Growth and Change**

Calvin states in a Calvin and Hobbs cartoon that he "thrives on change." When Hobbs challenges him with evidence of his own rigidity, he replies, "I thrive on making *other* people change." Many people define their job or goal in life as making other people change. While there may be a noble objective in this position, if the criterion is truly helping others to make their lives better, there is also great danger. The question is whether the change is in the general interest of the people and organization, or just in the leader's self-interest.

When a leader defines and *demonstrates* a commitment to personal growth and development, people see a role model for improvement rather than a manipulative effort. With the pace of expanding knowledge and continually changing environments,



leaders must develop a "learning organizational culture" for themselves and also for organization members. A learning organization however, must not be forced. A culture needs to encourage and reward honest and productive learning and development. When leaders feel "somebody else needs to change" in order to make the organization better, the leader is trapped in the role rather than making the role serve the people. Every day the leader needs to be better than yesterday—to do something more creatively or efficiently than yesterday and permit others in the organization to do the same.

### **Leadership Is Learning from Others**

All of us need different vantage points in order to see the situation (and ourselves) more clearly. While our view will never be completely objective, we can at least approximate a more objective perspective as we learn from others. As we ask them how they see us and how they see the situation, we acquire this perspective. No leader can adequately observe the world alone—the organization, the environment, the people, and the task are all so complex and dynamic that multiple inputs are essential.

The "Great Man Theory" of leadership—a concept based on the assumption that organizations need a charismatic "great man" who performs all the essential leadership functions—is inadequate in a modern organization. Great leaders illustrate this role—religious, military, political, and business—with the assumption that conditions today are similar; but conditions today are different. While we certainly have impressive leaders today, more likely the leaders are strong supporters of, and dependent on, the inputs and creativity of many others. At the very least, we all need another person that says, "Did you ever think of that?" "Are you sure you have the relevant facts?" So we find another vantage point or see through someone's eyes in order to understand the organization from a fresh perspective.

### **Leadership and Maps**

Leadership is a map. Use a map with south at the top as an illustration of the role of leadership. Consider the hypothesis that your ability to be a good leader is correlated with your ability to draw the map with south at the top and NOT call it upside-down. Different messages come for this illustration. We must look at the organization differently. Individuals look at the map from their own perspective; and every perspective includes the bias of the map maker, the people whose area is included in the map, and those who use the map.

Each paradigm is idiosyncratic. Individuals have a view of an organization that is influenced or limited by something in their experience, their theories, their perspective, their knowledge, their intellectual ability, their race, their gender, their religion, and their political or social background. A "revised" map shows a fascinating bias that I hadn't fully considered until someone showed me a map of the Americas with south at the top. At first, my reaction was one of interest, curiosity, and fun; but my perspective was expanded considerably when a group of executives from South America applauded the map. Why does someone applaud a map? I realized that all maps have a point of reference—a certain projection that is never absolutely and universally accurate. The map is not the territory—it is never real because the map is always an abstraction and is always contrived.

In the same way, leaders who only look at the organization from their own point of view, using their own maps will create a small, or perhaps a very large, distortion. Leaders need to look from the point of view of the people who really do the work—the assembly line, the student in the class, the citizen in the country, or the member of the religious or political group. So, you need to be able to draw the map with south at the top. Talk to people who articulate a "Southern Perspective." The views of those living south of the equator are superior. Their assumptions about north and what those in the North think about them is an important part of a revised view of the world and organizations. The same analogy can be used for an organizational chart.

Another geographical perspective results from my spending a lot of time in what we generally call the Middle East. As we move from West to East through that part of the world, we use the terms "Near-, Middle-, and Far-East." Some people in those regions do not like being referenced by how far they are from somewhere or which direction they are from. (i.e., where they live compared to Western Europe). While most people do not feel that Middle East is a pejorative term, a more precise and accurate term in describing different racial, religious, or national groups is really appreciated. The appropriateness and power of "Palestinian," "Jordanian," "Arab," "Israeli," "Jew," "Muslim," and "Christian Arab" when used in the right context is an important part of building a constructive relationship. A powerful leadership perspective involves identifying people by who they really are and not what they are called. Assuming, often by



default, that one particular perspective is the one everyone ought to have--and if they don't they are either uninformed, evil, or just being difficult--is not correct.

### **Leadership Is Often Painful, and Often Fun**

An upper-level manager stated that, for him, the biggest challenge of leadership is the "bad news" responsibility. The process of giving honest, negative feedback, including termination, creates a great deal of pain. The decisions that must be made, the ethical dilemmas that must be resolved, the people who must be disciplined, and the many lives that are affected, will inevitably cause a leader to struggle with values, conscience, and strategy. Leadership is a very difficult, demanding, and costly responsibility.

On the other hand, as many leaders have learned (parents, for example) there is clearly a time where leadership can, and should be, a great deal of fun. Making organizations effective, helping people grow, enjoying the success of others, and solving difficult problems *is* very rewarding and fun. But, the fun usually comes *after* much hard work—even pain.

### **Leadership and Metaphors**

In many respects leaders are philosophers. Leaders identify and teach culture, values, and vision; and leaders use metaphors to accomplish this. Bad leaders teach people to be selfish and racist; but good leaders teach people how to be just, fair, and competent—and how to build a better future. I learned the power of metaphors in this process when I was working with the Palestinian leadership in preparation for the Oslo negotiations with Israel. Suha Arafat, recently married to Yassir Arafat, said that since the 1960s Yassir had been married to the PLO. "Now," she said, "he is married to me. And, we are going to have children. Our children must grow up in peace in Palestine. Therefore, it is time to get on with the peace process." The power of this metaphor—children—is that it creates a transcendent value system. She was referring to literal children (her first child, Zahwa, was born six months later), but the metaphor focuses us on the future. Leaders need to build a better world for the children. When Rabin and Arafat signed the Oslo Accords at the White House, they both evoked the symbol or metaphor of children needing and deserving peace.

Metaphors are ennobling. Family, nature, religious, and artistic metaphors can all evoke positive values; but, we need to avoid those that

employ fighting and vengeance—those that create unnecessary hostility, hate, or intolerance for others who may be different. In this process, leaders create organizational culture; and, conversely, they destroy bad cultures. Leaders fail when they who play on historical animosities or fan the flames of intolerance by demeaning or belittling others in order to enhance their own power. When little communication and tolerance occur, it takes a leader with courage to play a transcendent role. Sometimes a martyr's reward comes to those who try. We look at people like Sadat and Rabin who overcame decades of conflict in order to pursue peace but died at the hands of intolerant zealots. Children are so often the victims of adult power, intransigence, and bias. Using the symbol of children to encourage the peace process was an original motive, and I am confident it will be a major force in bringing the parties back to the negotiating table.

### **Conclusions**

As a personal challenge, each of us might ask how we can become better leaders ourselves or how we can help others become more effective in their leadership roles. In this process, while there are no simple secrets or gimmicks, I have suggested some perspectives that, if carefully considered, could help us think through the complex process. A desperate need exists in our modern world for leaders who can provide a higher vision—leaders who can help organizations and people achieve their noble aspirations. By asking better questions, listening to appropriate people, articulating dreams, developing workable strategies, and educating our efforts to support rather than control others, we can move closer to the kind of organization, country, or family that will make the world a better place.



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