Ten Essential Leadership Skills for Managers

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Managers, in most organizations, have a dual responsibility. They are responsible both to the organization and to the people in the organization. The common question that arises is how do managers deal with this dual role? The answer is somewhat ambiguous, but explores the difference between management and leadership.

Leadership is, according to this author, the ability to empower others to create new management or human systems to efficiently achieve change through organizational goals and decision making. Likewise, management is the use of various means to carry on business functions. In other words, management is the skill of dealing with things, while leadership is the art of dealing with people. Managers can direct budgets, projects, and business affairs, but only leaders can empower people to direct these same functions (Owens, 1991). According to Max DePree (1992) who is the former CEO of Herman Miller and author of numerous books, "leadership combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals" (p. 9). In other words, it is the individuality and interpersonal relationships that define leadership.

This paper focuses on how managers can become better leaders by identifying and enhancing ten essential leadership skills. Through these skills, managers at all levels will better understand his or her leadership roles within organizations. What follows is a brief discussion of each of these leadership skills. As you read through this paper, remember the definition of leadership and the differences between management and leadership.

Goal Setting. Setting goals is a very important first step on the path to becoming a more effective leader. While managers surely set goals and work to achieve those goals, leaders operationalize goals through teamwork. Accomplishing goals becomes more than a task, it becomes a creative expression of leadership style. Setting goals is an important leadership skill because it encourages compliance, establishes evaluative criteria, and sets a plan for the future (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1993). Likewise, goals should be specific, measurable, and realistic enough to be attainable. In essence, goal setting is the first step in leadership and the last step in success.

Team Building. Creating a team-like atmosphere is a leadership skill that would enhance any manager's repertoire of available skills. Many managers who create and work in teams would benefit from enhanced team building skills. According to DePree (1989), the importance of team building is that "everyone has the right and the duty to influence decision-making and to understand the results" (p. 24). Through team building, leaders

include others in participative management – allowing others to have some say into how things are accomplished and how work is done (DePree, 1989). A few helpful hints for building a cohesive team include: create a purpose; identify potential members and define their role within the group; empower others to do their jobs; praise the group for accomplishments; and encourage openness and togetherness in decision making (Belzer, 1991). Effective leaders are open to the new ideas and new ways of thinking that a team atmosphere can offer – after all, a team can be only as good (effective) as its leader (DePree, 1992).

Empowerment. Many managers have mastered the skill of delegation – giving someone something to do. But to be an effective leader, one must master the art of empowerment. Delegation alone is simply assigning a task for someone to complete under the manager's direction. Empowerment is authorizing someone to take the lead in making decisions about completing the same task. In other words, when a leader empowers others, he or she is allowing them the freedom to make choices – good or bad, right or wrong. And leaders are judged by how well others succeed when empowered. The measure of an effective leader is the ability to prepare others for this responsibility. Therefore, it is critical to empower others to be their best – ensuring success. In Leadership Jazz, DePree (1992) suggests three lessons in empowering others towards success: 1) provide clear and concise directions; 2) display confidence that the task will be accomplished effectively and on time; and 3) trust in your ability to prepare others for this responsibility as well as their ability to respond to your trust. These lessons will serve every manager well on his or her path to becoming a better leader.

Vision. One key difference between managers and leaders is that true leadership involves the development of a vision. Likewise, this vision must be articulated to the organization in such a way as to both have meaning and stir a reaction. This is one of the most difficult tasks of a leader. Operationalizing a vision requires more than simply knowing a direction for the organization – a leader must communicate that vision simply, theatrically, and forcefully (Phi Theta Kappa, 1991). According to James Kouzes and Barry Posner (1995), to bring others along on this journey called vision, leaders must find common ground and develop a common language, passionately share the vision with others, and be sincere in their motives and ideas. In essence, a vision can serve as a ticket to lifelong learning for every member of the organization. A vision should detail the future of the organization and the path that will be followed as this future unfolds. Again, according to DePree (1989), leadership is taking responsibility for what happens tomorrow instead of managing day-to-day. This future-focused attitude is the essence of vision.

Time Management. Like goal setting, time management is a traditional leadership skill that will serve managers well. Its application to leadership is strong and it is how leaders effectively accomplish tasks. The need for time management skills increases exponentially with success; the more one experiences success, the less time he or she has to devote to that success (Rehnquist, 1995). Several time management tips that might be useful to develop include: learn to say no; finish what you start; plan what you will do for the day; and clear your desk at the end of each day. Each of these tips, both collectively and individually, allows leaders to feel better prepared for the tasks that lay ahead. Time management is not a quick fix that lasts forever. It is, instead, life management requiring significant changes in both a leaders habits and leadership style – it is organizing yourself and knowing your limits. Again, William Rehnquist (1995) suggests "time is a commodity the supply of which is not inexhaustible (p. 5).

Communication. Interpersonal communication skills are important for effective leadership. Leaders, by definition, deal with people, therefore, interpersonal communication skills should be ranked among the most important tools a leader can possess. Like all relationships, open and honest communication must exist for the organization to run effectively and to survive over time (DePree, 1989). In understanding communication, one must first understand the process. Communication occurs when someone sends a message and someone else receives that message. The process becomes complicated when noise gets in the way – noise like our biases, beliefs, values, or opinions. It is this noise that interrupts the message from being received or delivered effectively and causes confusion between sender and receiver. Removing this noise requires concentration and a commitment to openly and honestly listen to one another. Communication, in essence, involves making promises – promises to those we lead, those we follow, and to everyone in the organization. Effective communication, in turn, is living up to these promises (DePree, 1992).

Conflict Resolution. Conflict is a clash between opposing ideas, is present in every organization, and is unavoidable. Some conflict occurs when leaders are inconsistent in their actions towards stated goals (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1993). However, some degree of conflict can be helpful to the organization to "bolster innovation and performance through competition and higher productivity" (Hughes, et al, p. 365). In fact, good leaders should not avoid conflict, but should embrace it as a means for organizational change and growth. Resolving conflict is simply allowing organized conflict to happen while being prepared to step in and facilitate should the conflict become destructive. Resolving conflict is a skill that should only occur when the conflict becomes unhealthy for the organization. Prior to that

point, good leaders have built a team that is confident in their skills, has trust in one another, and can work through the differences and disagreements that lead to conflict. However, at the point when conflict becomes destructive, DuPree (1992) suggests that leaders focus on the issues underlying the conflict instead of on the personalities of the parties involved. In other words, when managing conflict, deal with the things that matter – get to the facts.

Risk. As managers, to grow and develop our leadership skills, one must be prepared to assume risk. Risk is exposure to possible failure and requires the leader to expose him or herself to the judgment and scrutiny of others. Assuming a leadership role involves living in a glass house whereby others are looking for a role model – for someone who will show the way and direct the organization into the future. Leaders are accountable for their actions, words, and decisions. DePree (1989) suggests that risk involves the leader giving up control of organizational decision making by involving others while still being ultimately responsible for the decisions being made – and accountable not only for the actions of themselves, but for the actions of everyone else. Taking risks is hard for many of us, but in order to grow as a leader, we must be willing to put ourselves on the line.

Diversity. Leaders have a responsibility to ensure diversity in their organizations and to respect the diversity of those around them. We live in a multicultural world where diversity comes in many forms – one's ability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, just to name a few. We can deal with this diversity, and with our own biases and stereotypes, by asking ourselves a few simple questions:

1. Are my biases and stereotypes influencing my actions or decisions?
2. Do I typically respect the opinions of others? If no, why not?
3. Do I easily adapt to change in my workplace or other environment?
4. Am I easily offended or do I offend others?

Prizing diversity is a truly effective means of leadership and is inclusive of everyone around us. Leaders need to "derive strength from human bonds rather than building walls out of human differences" (DePree, 1992, p. 62). Indeed, this is a model for effective leadership and a very powerful statement.

Ethics. For many managers, ethics is simply conforming to a set of professional rules, guidelines, and regulations. However, for leaders, ethics is the moral reasoning behind decision making. This moral reasoning comes from deep within us and defines who we are at the core of our being. In order to be consistent in our reasoning, we must learn to identify and understand what drives us and embrace our own morality – this is how leaders make ethical decisions. Such decisions involve questions of "what is the right thing to do?"

and can only be answered based on our core values and beliefs. Ethics is what drives a leader in their decision making and upon discovery and action, is a valuable skill ensuring effective leadership.

The path for managers to embark upon to grow and develop leadership skills begins with the discussion and operationalization of these ten essential skills. Managers have the power to get things done within organizations, but is this enough? DePree (1992) suggests that "good leadership includes teaching and learning, building relationships and influencing people, as opposed to exercising one's power" (p. 177). Moving beyond the skills of management into the art of leadership is essential to becoming a successful leader. The truly effective manager will embrace this change.

Sources

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