Defining Leadership

Over the past century much research has been conducted on the topic of leadership. These studies have produced many theories and differing views on the subject. Most definitions contain similar elements; leaders, followers, a hierarchy, some form of influence, and a purpose to be served or goal to be achieved.

Because there is no one definition of leadership, the leader is free to choose the elements he or she favors in order to manage one's situation and get results through others. This article will prepare you to state, develop or define your own unique leadership philosophy and style.

Examining Leadership Styles & Schools of Thought

Each leader communicates in their own way, based on a variety of factors, including personality, role models, experience, education, training and the situation. Each follower also has their unique way of reacting or responding to any given leader. It's challenging to get the leadership – follower fit just right.

Leaders must work at developing their skills while better understanding their followers. Followers often have to adjust to a leadership style that does not perfectly suit them. This discussion of leadership styles looks at some basic approaches to leading people.
Basic Leadership Styles

According to Kendra Van Wagner, in Lewin's Leadership Styles (2009), what started as a study with schoolchildren turned out to have a dramatic impact on how we've viewed leadership styles for the past 70 years. Kurt Lewin, one of the preeminent psychologists of the 20th century, led a team of researchers in 1939 in identifying different styles of leadership. Although new styles of leadership have been named over the years, this study was influential and established the name and description of three major styles: Authoritarian, Democratic and Laissez-Fair.

Leaders with the Authoritarian, or Autocratic style, set clear expectations for what needs to be accomplished, when it should be done and how it should be done. Since authoritarian leaders make decisions independently of the group, there is generally a clear distinction between leader and followers. Autocratic leaders can be viewed as controlling, bossy and dictatorial when this style is abused.

The most effective style, according to Lewin's study, was the Democratic or Participative style. Although participative leaders encourage group input, they typically retain final say in making decisions. Group members under this style of leadership feel more engaged in the decision making process and are generally more creative and motivated. Although their contributions are of a much higher quality, members of this group may be less productive than those under authoritarian leadership.

The Laissez-Fair or Delegative style of leadership best suits situations where group members are able and willing to work independently. If unable to work independently, members of this group will probably be less productive and make more demands on the leader. They may be less cooperative since Delegative leaders offer little or no guidance to group members, and leave decision making up to the group.

In summary, the more independent the followers, the less controlling needs be the leader. And, the more independent the followers, the more likely they will want to take initiative and responsibility for planning, action and results. With more dependent followers, the leader needs to assume control and responsibility for direction, activities and outcomes.

Schools of Leadership Thought

There are at least eight major leadership schools of thought today. Each school includes various approaches to leadership. In an online article entitled Eight Major Leadership Theories, Kendra Van Wagner describes these major theories as: Great Man, Trait, Contingency, Situational, Behavioral, Participative, Management and Relationship Theories. She writes, “Early leadership theories focused on what qualities distinguished between leaders and followers, while subsequent theories looked at other variables such as situational factors and skill level. While many different leadership theories have emerged, most can be classified as one of eight major types” (2009). This article is available at http://psychology.about.com/od/leadership/p/leadtheories.htm?r=et

An examination of these major theories raises the following questions:

1. Are people “born leaders,” do some have traits that make them better suited to leadership or can leaders be made? (Great Man, Trait, Behavioral)
2. Does one style fit all when it comes to leading others, or is it more effective to evaluate and respond to each follower and situation differently? (Contingency, Situational)
3. Should power reside with one person at the “top” of an organization or is it better to distribute power, authority and decision making among participants in an organization? (Participative)
4. Is there an effective system of rewards and punishment for improving performance of members in an organization? (Management or Transactional)
5. How important is the relationship or engagement between a leader and followers? How concerned should a leader be with the growth, fulfillment and well being of followers? (Relationship or Transformational)
Establishing Authority & Utilizing Power with Followers

One essential leadership challenge is developing authority with followers. When it comes to the subject of authority – one must consider power, leverage and influence. Although these words can mean the same thing at times, this article assigns each a slightly different application.

Power

Power can be obvious or not so. Either way, power usually gives one some sort of advantage over, or with, others. Power can include physical, economic, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual or relationship strengths we possess. Power involves who we are, who we know, what we are able to do and what we have at our disposal.

Authority

The match between a leader’s values and actions generally gives them credibility, integrity -- and authority with others. A leader with authority is one that people WANT to follow. Followers watch how closely the leader lives in alignment with the truth he or she pronounces. Walking the walk, talking the talk and living the life – this gives one authority with others.

Leverage

Leverage also gives the leader an advantage with others. Leverage often pertains to things like rules, policies, procedures, laws and other protocol people must follow to get along, get things done and keep their jobs. As a leader, it’s important to know what legal and policy leverage we have with followers.

Influence

Influence involves the relationship between the leader and any individual follower or group of followers. The Gallup Organization (2006) did an extensive study that revealed the importance of relationship between leaders and followers. The 20 year study, with 80,000 managers and their organizations, revealed that leaders have a huge impact on the commitment, engagement and productivity of their followers. Key influencers for these followers were feeling cared for by a supervisor or someone at work, receiving recognition on at least a weekly basis and having someone encourage their development.

Followership

The Gallup article revealed the results of a study on worker engagement. Worker engagement has to do with an employee's committed and positive involvement in the workplace. Gallup placed respondents in three categories: Engaged, Not Engaged and Actively Disengaged. The study indicated that worker happiness and wellbeing can boost engagement and productivity. One important factor that influenced employee happiness and well being was their relationship with their supervisor.

Of course, a big part of this issue has to do with the followers. According to Barbara Kellerman author of Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders, the follower’s degree of involvement plays a large role in determining the nature of the superior-subordinate relationship. She categorizes followers as Isolates, Bystanders, Participants, Activists and Diehards (2008).

Isolates function in a detached manner. Bystanders observe but don’t participate. Participants care enough to try and make an impact. Activists have strong feelings about their leaders and organizations, and act accordingly. Diehards, are prepared to go down for their cause – whether for or against the leader.

Most leaders prefer followers who do something rather than nothing, and who are more engaged in the organization rather than not engaged or actively disengaged. One important aim for the leader is to find ways to develop participants who are enthused and committed about the work, but not overly zealous or destructive in their devotion. While followers may lack authority, most of us have learned they certainly do not lack power and influence (Kellerman, 2008).
Identifying Four Pillars of Leadership

Displaying Character

Because leaders are on display 24/7/365, they're always exposed to issues of character, integrity, credibility and trust. There's no escaping the expectations of others. For this reason alone, not all people are cut out to be leaders. A good starting point in developing one's character is to begin with an idea of who you want to be and by what standards you choose to live. Integrity means living in alignment with the ideals we embrace. This is also a source of our credibility, and it's our “credibility” that gives us “credit” with others.

Maintaining Commitment

One's family, followers and public can also be sensitive to the individual's every decision when it comes to keeping commitments. Leaders are expected to keep their commitments. People are disappointed when they don't. Leaders, however, can also become over-committed when elected, invited or volunteered to serve in multiple leadership roles. At some point, this can result in exhaustion and burnout. Leaders must evaluate how many commitments they have at any given time, and consider which ones stay and which ones are ready to be handled by others.

Increasing Consciousness

In The Congruent Leader, Corrales & Rhodes (2001) identify three levels of personal growth as Emotional, Rational and Integral stages. The Emotional level refers to a less mature stage where one is more concerned with self and tends to be reactive towards things they don't like. At the Rational stage life becomes about self and others. At this stage people respond rather than reacting to life's challenges.

At an Integral stage of development, a person sees things as being about everyone and becomes more proactive. From this level the leader can take a higher, inclusive, long-term look at the world, and their industry, organization, followers, families, community, etc. Although humans can't always make themselves grow, the individual can take aim at higher perspectives and work on developing new behaviors until he or she grows into a new level.

Practicing Continuation

This fourth C, after character, commitment and consciousness is continuation. Many organizations today are asking, “Who will lead us in the future?” It's not uncommon to see a once inspired group of people, who were rallied by a great leader, begin to falter when there is no replacement in sight.

For this reason, it’s important for leaders and members of an organization to identify upcoming talent that can be taught, encouraged, coached and mentored. If we believe in our work and want the organization or movement to continue, we must make leadership continuation a priority.

Creating Your Unique Philosophy & Style

My boss, at my first job after college, was a highly respected individual named Lee. When Lee spoke, people listened. Since Lee was also our mentor, other managers and employees often quoted him when speaking to others by saying, “Lee's philosophy is….” Back then I used to wonder when I would be experienced enough to have my own philosophy. Well, that time has come! Here is a statement that neatly sums up my leadership style and philosophy:

My Philosophy Title: Results through Relationships

Brief Statement

My philosophy is entitled “Results through Relationships.” I can only get results if I develop relationships with followers that allow for mutual influence and take us towards the goal. The Schools of Leadership Thought driving my philosophy are Relationship, Situational and Trait Theories. My influences include parents, coaches, teachers and managers, as well as several historical figures.
Now, I invite you to draft your leadership philosophy by reviewing the schools of leadership and taking these steps.

1. Give your philosophy a short, concise title.
2. Briefly describe your philosophy.
3. Name which parts come from what Leadership Theories.
4. Name your most important influences.

Regardless of your philosophy or style, you and your followers will be able to function more effectively if they understand your frame of reference and you understand theirs, and everyone finds ways to work together to accomplish the end results.