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The practical qualities of effective leaders. *Stephen R. Axley.*

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The Practical Qualities of Effective Leaders

Probably no other single topic has garnered more attention from management researchers in the last forty years than leadership. The subject also persists, year in and year out, as one of the hottest topics in management training and development, indicating that practicing managers are still interested in discovering the secrets to effective leadership.

All along, the ultimate goal of scholars and managers alike has been to identify those things--personal traits or behaviors, situational factors, etc.--that, in combination, somehow add up to effective leadership. At first, the inquiries focused on traits or personal features which successful leaders possess. Qualities such as intelligence, self-concept, and even height were connected to successful leaders, although not consistently. Over time these efforts produced a mish-mash of personal attributes that supposedly characterized successful leaders. Little was offered, however, to explain the nature or strength of the connections. In short, this way of explaining effective leadership fizzled, largely because of inconsistent results and because scholars and managers alike were interested in "doing something" with the findings--namely, identifying people with leadership potential; or better yet, teaching them to be effective leaders. "Teaching" traits or other fairly stable personal qualities, however, is an almost impossible short-term task, and consequently, was not seen as much of an answer to the leadership questions facing the organizations of our nation.

So the focus turned to the "behaviors" or the behavioral styles that leaders use in the process of leading. A number of efforts were made in this direction, led primarily by researchers at Ohio State University and the University of Michigan. These studies indicated that the behaviors connected with leadership tend to cluster around two broad, general dimensions, one of which could be characterized by the "structuring" initiatives taken by the leader in the interest of getting the job done, and the other of which reflects different forms of leader "consideration" shown towards followers.

The problem with these approaches to leadership--both the study of it and the resulting prescriptions--was an underlying assumption guiding the efforts: that there is one best style of leadership that should apply across all situations. Common sense and some careful observation would suggest otherwise. There are circumstances where a strong, get-it-done task orientation is needed and most effective. But there are also times when a more personable, caring behavioral style will achieve the same results, and without some of the negative emotional by-products in followers that sometimes accompany more directive approaches. There are many combinations of leader styles emphasizing varying degrees of "direction" and "consideration" and the main shortcoming of the one-best style school of leadership was its failure to recognize that different situations call for different styles.

Which brings us to the present. Today, much leadership research and training focuses on spelling out

those "contextual" factors that seem to influence the effectiveness of different leadership styles. And a lengthy list it is, consisting of such items as leader-follower relations, task structure, leader position power, follower ability and willingness, leader values and confidence in subordinates, organizational factors, and a host of personal characteristics of subordinates, to mention but a few. In other words, the list is long and, for the manager or supervisor who might hope to apply even some of its "lessons" on the job, almost hopelessly complicated.

But there are other, often much more straightforward, sources of good, usable advice on what it is that we can do to be more effective leaders. Those sources are managers and supervisors themselves. Through our actual experiences and observations of others, most of us have a pretty clear idea of things effective leaders do in being effective.

Recently, I've asked upwards of 200 managers and supervisors in a number of different training workshops and seminars to share their thinking on the topic--to tell me, on the basis of their experience, what makes for "effective leaders." Their advice has a clarity, a credibility, and a "do-ability" to it that is lacking in much of what is prescribed about leadership these days. It seemed worth passing along, so I've compiled and briefly discussed some of the more frequently mentioned recommendations below.

* **Communicate well.** A hallmark of effective leadership is good communication. "Good communication" to these managers and supervisors means several things. First, it means clarity in such matters as giving instructions and information. This requires remembering that virtually any attempt at communicating is fraught with potential for misunderstanding. People interpret words and actions in all sorts of different ways.

Good communication also means keeping your people informed, and in a timely fashion. Most of us appreciate being "in the know" about things or events that affect our work lives, and we respect those who work at keeping us that way.

* **Listen.** Effective leaders are good listeners. They realize that there is much that can be learned from followers by just listening. Good ideas, feedback about what's going well and what's not going well, feedback on one's own supervisory or managerial style--all of these and more can be learned by developing good listening habits.

* **Are approachable.** Part of being a good listener is the perception on the part of those you lead that you are approachable. Being approachable means that you are seen as receptive and concerned; that you will give people your undivided attention and that they will be "heard," no matter what's on their minds. Approachable leaders eventually come to be better informed on matters of concern to their followers, because their followers feel comfortable enough to bring just about anything to the leader's attention.

* **Delegate.** Effective leaders delegate. They broaden the responsibilities and the authority of their people. They recognize the considerable payoffs in delegation: that it's one of the best ways to develop people, that it very often motivates people and promotes more commitment to doing a good job, and that it frees up the manager's or supervisor's time for other things, to mention just a few.

* **Lead by example.** To quote one manager, effective leaders "walk what they talk." Their actions exemplify and even symbolize what they want and expect of their people. Additionally, they realize that the respect of their followers is invaluable, and that respect cannot really be "demanded," but rather must be earned through actions demonstrating high expectations for self as well as for others.

* "Read" situations and people well. This is one of the most essential skills in the development and practice of effective leadership. Circumstances and people can differ immensely from one situation to another, and what might be a very effective leadership style in one case might not work as well or at all under different conditions. Time and again, managers and supervisors distinguish those who can accurately "read" situations and people--and who adapt accordingly--from those who can't or won't. Effective leaders know when to ask and when to tell. They know when the "pull" of an encouraging word is needed more than the "push" of a directive. They're aware that we all have differing needs and levels of ability and willingness to do a job, and so they tailor their leadership style appropriately to accommodate the circumstances.

* Use a variety of power bases to influence others. Among more than a few managers and supervisors, "power" is, unfortunately, likened to a dirty word. That's because in the minds of many, the exercise of power has come to be equated with strongarm management. But power is simply a resource for influencing others, and can take many forms, only some of which are coercive. For instance, being seen as "expert" can certainly be a basis for influencing others. Being liked, loved, respected, or viewed as a role model can do the same. The point is that effective leadership depends crucially on the judicious use of power. Effective leaders use the more "personal" power bases, such as expertise, a relationship based on liking, love, respect, or identification, when situations allow. Because these bases of power exist largely in the eyes of the follower, followers in a sense participate in their own influence more voluntarily than when other, more restrictive forms of power--such as threat of punishment or formal authority--are used.

* Are good teachers. Effective leaders possess the abilities of good teachers. They're knowledgeable and can communicate that knowledge in a usable fashion. And perhaps more important, they develop their followers by challenging them to learn, by showing them the rewards in learning, and by maintaining an openness of mind to new ideas and new ways of doing things.

* Care about their people--and show it. One of the surest ways to develop some of the "personal" power bases mentioned earlier is to show genuine caring for your people. This means not only expressing a sincere interest in their personal concerns when appropriate, but also doing those little things that take only a little effort to convey your caring: greeting people warmly, personally, and informally; taking some time on-the-job to chat about off-the-job matters of mutual interest; publicly recognizing and praising their accomplishments; maintaining a sense of humor and being able to laugh--especially at yourself. These are just some of the things that make leaders more human and more appealing to us. It is very much a "give-to-get" phenomenon: You show your care for others and they will show theirs for you.

* Are fair, honest, and consistent. Fairness in expectations and treatment of people is a cornerstone of effective leadership. People appreciate and respect the leader who treats them with dignity, consideration, and simple honesty. Credibility comes from the consistency that leaders demonstrate between their words and deeds--again, "walking what you talk." All of these qualities translate into personal resources that leaders can draw upon in the process of leading.

* Know how to criticize. Lots of people know how to criticize, but an ability to do it constructively, without arousing defensiveness in others, is uncommon. One way to help minimize defensiveness is to phrase comments as descriptively as possible, avoiding explosive value-laden terms and sweeping generalizations as much as possible. The latter convey a judgmental, evaluative point-of-view that often motivates a recipient to respond in kind.

Another constructive tactic involves communicating in such a way as to convey your respect for the

other person's worth while acknowledging your differences. A good part of this dimension of communication is non-verbal, involving such things as hearing another person out without interruption, and making supportive gestures with facial expressions, head nods, and hands. Of course, word choices that convey equality, acceptance, and supportiveness rather than superiority are also helpful.

* Know how to accept criticism. Criticism is a fact of life for leaders. Leadership involves taking chances on people and on decisions. There will inevitably be outcomes or methods that someone doesn't like. Effective leaders can take criticism from others and, in fact, often solicit it so as to learn more about the impact of their actions. They can readily admit when they are wrong and make alterations without keeping score on those critical of the leader.

Effective leadership. No doubt the search for the secrets to it will continue as long as there is a need for organizations. The advice of the managers and supervisors represented here is certainly not the final word on leadership. But because it comes from people whose experience is extensive, diverse, and who have seen what makes for effective leadership, it can nevertheless be a practical word in the interest of improving our organizations.

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