



Leadership at Work

Is a manager a leader? Some are and some unfortunately aren't, but they all should think of themselves as leading the people who work under them. Here, some thoughts about leadership in business and everywhere else . . .

□ No form of social organization has ever existed without leaders. To have someone in charge is as natural as the birds and the bees, the former with their pecking orders, the latter with their queens. In human affairs, even those who reject traditional leadership structures find a need for leaders themselves; anarchist parties dedicated to the destruction of the state regularly elect slates of officers. The Bolsheviks who strove for the dictatorship of the proletariat wound up with the pure and simple dictatorship of one man.

Like cream, it seems, leaders naturally rise to the surface. But unlike cream, they are not necessarily the best part of the whole. The wizardry of popular leadership has been applied at least as much to evil as to good over the course of history. The example of Adolph Hitler springs to mind — a charismatic leader whose ability to muster a mass following for his twisted visions brought immense suffering to mankind.

There are those who would argue, however, that dictators like Hitler and Stalin were not really leaders. They may once have led in a demagogic fashion, but they turned into tyrants when the absolute corruption of absolute power took hold. "A leader and a tyrant are polar opposites," wrote James MacGregor Burns, the award-winning American political scientist. In his 1978 book *Leadership*, Burns drew a strict line between those who lead and those who wield blunt power.

This may seem like an overly idealistic view of the question, since so many so-called leaders are demonstrably quick to force people to do their

bidding. But it does fit in with the theory, if not always the practice, of democratic rule. The democratic system tries to guard against excessive power and its attendant corruption. In the Watergate affair the world witnessed the system in action when no less a personage than the president of the United States was driven from office for abusing his power.

One of the reasons for the restraints on power is to control ambition. The democratic system recognizes that ambition always has been and always will be a vital force in human affairs. It seeks to harness this force to the best interests of the people. Similarly, the private enterprise economy, with its rewards for performance and risk-taking, pools the efforts generated by personal ambition into a general effort to produce an endowment in which everyone shares.

When viewed in the light of ambition, Burns's distinction between tyrants and leaders stands out vividly. The tyrant's ambition is for himself alone; he may use other people to gain it, but they are no more than his tools. In contrast, the leader is ambitious not only for himself, but for a cause which he shares with his following. Rightly or wrongly, he believes that his followers will be better off when and if they reach their common goal. (Neither leaders nor tyrants are exclusively males, of course; the masculine gender is used throughout in a generic sense.)

It is the presence of a following that compels leaders to act responsibly. They occupy their positions only by others' consent. Responsibility is the

lynchpin of leadership in a democratic society. A prime minister is responsible to the electorate; a general to the civil authority; a chief executive officer to the shareholders of his company. And every leader is responsible to those who follow him, no matter how many or how few.

It would be naïve to suppose that this system precludes autocratic behaviour. There will always be those who love power for its own sake, and who will short-circuit the system to put their own ambition first. A tyrant refuses to work for a common cause, and is pathologically afraid of rivals. He "suppresses every superiority, does away with good men, forbids education and light, controls the movements of the citizens, and, keeping them in perpetual servitude, wants them to grow accustomed to baseness and cowardice..." That was written by Aristotle in the 3rd century B.C., but such tactics linger on today.

Yet if tyrants continue to carve out places for themselves in offices, on shop floors and elsewhere, they are no less vulnerable to overthrow than their counterparts in palaces. They may be mistaken for leaders, which they often believe themselves to be. But they are not because they force people to go along with them instead of *bringing* them along with them. They bully and blackmail and manipulate; they do everything but lead.

Unfortunately, leadership is very often confused with something else, its antithesis included. Burns cited a study in which people attributed 130 different meanings to the word. His own definition was the product of years of research and thinking about the subject. It is that leadership is a symbiotic relationship between those who lead and those who are led.

The art of the possible in business leadership

"Leadership is inseparable from the followers' needs and goals," Burns declared. His theory takes on flesh and blood when you think of what happens in democratic politics. Each party leader vies for followers by attempting to create a symbiosis — a feeling that "we need each other." Any intelligent leader will attempt to adjust his needs and goals to those of his potential followers within the limits that principle allows.

"Leaders are essentially politicians and must deal with political forces," wrote psychologist Harry Levinson in his excellent *Levinson Letter*. He was referring to managers in business and other organizations, who, he insists, should think of themselves as leaders ahead of anything else. Apart from having to gain and hold a constituency, manager/leaders must practice the political art of conciliation. They are subject to pressures from above, below, and sometimes on the same level from other departments. It takes political acumen to smooth these pressures out.

No one is exempt. The chief executive officer must be mindful of the disparate interests of directors, other shareholders, employees, consumers, governments, and the general public. "Middle managers" might ruefully conclude that they are in the middle like the ham in a sandwich as they try to cope with demands from on high for more production while the union is insisting on adherence to work rules. The foreman must try to meet his schedule on days when his crew seems to be all thumbs, one of the machines is down for repairs, and the shop steward is raising hell over a grievance. If politics is the art of the possible, it is never more so than in the leadership of a business concern.

Using routine as a block to stop needed changes

It should be stressed, though, that the politics of leadership is quite a different thing from what is commonly called "office politics." Political intrigue within the organization is usually counter-productive, and greater productivity is the ultimate goal of a leader with the best interests of the organization at heart.

"Leading does not mean managing," wrote organizational expert Warren G. Bennis in his 1976 book *The Unconscious Conspiracy*. By definition, a leader's mission is to make progress; those who manage but do not lead are mired in the *status quo*. Office politicians generally fall into this category. The routine in which they take such delight may be the wrong routine; it may be outmoded or

useless in the first place. But they are adept at using routine to block off needed changes. They also tend to be empire builders, and the bigger the empire, the harder it is to change.

They will sometimes accept change, but only when it suits their own purposes. This clearly makes them non-leaders from Burns's point of view. They are thinking of themselves first, not of the good of the organization or the people who work with them. Their ambition — and it is often intense — is aimed at a personal, not a collective, goal.

But even those who genuinely want to lead frequently find themselves managing the *status quo* against their own wishes. Their schedule is jammed with daily chores, interspersed with trouble-shooting current crises. Very little time is left over for leadership functions such as planning and maintaining staff morale.

A case of running as fast as you can to stay where you are

In a study of the working days of five top U.S. executives, management scientist Henry Mintzberg found that they rarely had time to think about anything except the question immediately before them. Half of the activities they carried out lasted less than nine minutes, and only 10 per cent lasted more than an hour. They "met a steady stream of callers and mail from the moment they arrived in the morning until they left in the evening," Mintzberg recorded. "Coffee breaks and lunches were inevitably work related, and ever-present subordinates seemed to usurp any free moment."

Nor was this frenetic regimen confined to the executive suite. A study of 160 British managers, mostly in the middle ranks, found that they were able to work for a half-hour or more without interruption only once every three days or so. The working lives of foremen were even more fragmented. A study of 56 foremen in the U.S. showed that they averaged an astonishing 583 activities, or one every 48 seconds, per eight-hour shift.

It would seem to be a case of running as fast as you can to stay where you are. How, in such conditions, can anyone afford to function as a

leader? The first answer would seem to be to ask whether you might not be using routine as a subconscious excuse to avoid more difficult, long-term activities. "I think that all of us find that acting on routine problems, just because they are the easiest, often blocks us from getting involved in the bigger ones," Warren Bennis observed.

It may call for a considerable reordering of priorities to pay more attention to leadership, but it rightly should be at or near the top of the priority list for any manager. "Free time is made, not found, in the manager's job; it is forced into the schedule," wrote Mintzberg. Time should be made with determination to plan, to introduce needed changes, to appeal to the motivation of the staff, and to develop people's potentialities if leadership is to be accorded the importance it deserves.

There are various ways of eliminating routine, including the greater employment of specialists to present managers with well-thought-out priorities and alternatives for decision. The way that fits best with good leadership is the delegation of authority and tasks. Delegation often requires forbearance on the part of the superior, who may be able to handle work better and more easily than his deputy. There is always a temptation when watching an inexperienced person go through the trials and errors of an unfamiliar exercise to do or redo it yourself.

But it is foolish to believe that your way is the only way of doing something; the method is less important than getting the work done satisfactorily. When things go wrong with delegated work, a conscientious leader will point out the mistakes in the hope that they will not go wrong the next time around. Delegation should be used to bring forth new leaders by training them in an ever-broadening range of experience and responsibility. Many leaders fail to give sufficient weight to the continuity of leadership in the positions they occupy. In a sense, they should be working themselves out of their present jobs by preparing others to take over. Delegation is a method of doing just that.

Certainly it would seem to be the right approach for dealing with the present and coming generations of working people. They are better educated, more assertive and more sceptical than ever before.

Changes in values in the past two decades have brought a variety of fresh forces to bear on the leadership of all types of institutions. In 1958 Robert Tannenbaum and Warren H. Schmidt published a paper in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern." In 1973 they felt called upon to write an addendum to it in the light of the social changes that had taken place in the meantime — the rise of the youth, civil rights, ecology and consumer movements, and concern with the quality of life in the workplace and everywhere else.

They concluded that all this called for more sensitivity and flexibility in management. "Today's manager is more likely to deal with employees who resent being treated as subordinates, who may be highly critical of any organizational system, who expect to be consulted and to exert influence, and who often stand on the edge of alienation from the institution that needs their loyalty and commitment," they explained.

Employees today are not easily scared or fooled

The social atmosphere has cooled down somewhat since that was written in the early 'seventies, but that does not change the fact that a distinctly new breed of workers has emerged. They have been brought up in their homes and schools to expect a say in decisions that affect them. They are downright suspicious of institutional motives as a result of media muckraking into the sins of the "Establishment," some of it valid, some of it not. They are jealous of their rights, real or perceived. They are forward in making demands for a fair share of rewards and recognition. They demand to be treated as individuals. They are not easily scared or fooled.

Some walk around in T-shirts exhorting: "Question Authority!" Though they stop short of displaying their sentiments on their chests, the majority would subscribe to Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s view that "authority is entitled only to the respect it earns, and not a whit more." No longer does a title on a door or a carpet on a floor command automatic deference.

With the rise of the new worker, leadership has become a matter of eliciting co-operation rather

than commanding obedience. Co-operation means a willing effort on both sides; the first definition of the word in the Oxford Concise Dictionary is "working together to same end." This brings us back full circle to Burns's definition of leadership as a relationship in which the leader and followers share the same goals and needs. Nowadays, their needs are apt to be similar. Recent studies show that modern workers are highly concerned with personal autonomy, appreciation of their efforts, and a chance to realize their potentialities. If they cannot fulfil at least a portion of these needs at work, the energy generated by the drive to meet them is the organization's loss.

In the present setting, management scholar Douglas McGregor has suggested that "the essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions and methods of operation so that people can achieve their own goals *best* by directing *their own* efforts toward organizational objectives." For the manager, this implies a thorough understanding of the individual personalities of the people he is called upon to lead. It also implies the exercise of some of the finest human values — respect for the individual, justice, consideration and understanding. The old-fashioned boss accustomed to the servant-master system might protest that this approach can only lead to slackness. But given that bosses must get tough at times, it would seem that people will respond to toughness more positively when they know that it is justified by a record of fair play.

In the final analysis, leaders can expect their decent treatment of others to be reciprocated. It is this reciprocation that makes the difference between an outstanding and an adequate job, and inspires people to pitch in with an extra effort when the going gets rough. Lao-Tse was a poet and philosopher, not a management consultant, and he lived almost 2,500 years ago. But he showed that the principles of leadership are timeless when he wrote: "Fail to honour people, and they will fail to honour you; but of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, 'we did this ourselves'."