Manager or Leader?

Wayne Turk

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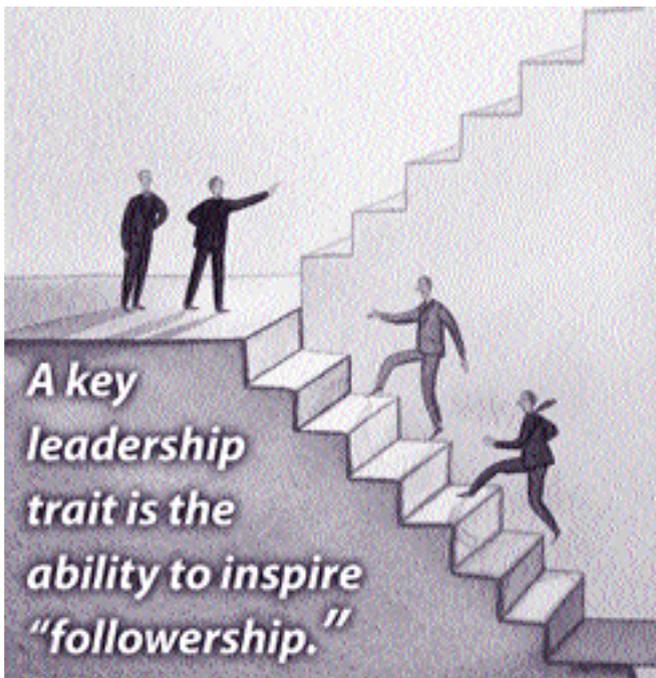
Theorists have been asking for over a hundred years which is better for a company (or a project in this case), a good manager or a good leader? And guess what: As with most "theoretical" questions, they disagree on the answer. Maybe there is a practical answer that gets away from the theoretical. We'll get to that later.

They're Different—Ask Anyone

Before we can get to an answer, we should look at what people see as the differences between a leader and a manager. Most people will agree that there's a difference between a manager and a leader, but go a step further and ask them what that difference is, and they usually begin to hem and haw. They may have a mental image, but they can't put it into words; they just don't seem to have a good definition.

There is a management proverb that says "Managers do things right, while leaders do the right thing." It's one of those pithy sayings that sound good, but it doesn't really tell us anything. So let's see what some of the experts say.

These are a consolidation pulled from many sources and are hard to attribute to a single expert in many cases.

One convenient answer is that leadership is intangible but includes charisma. Some say that it is an indefinable something that you are born with. Is that right? Like the opening question, we'll put off the answer until later.

Another answer is that managers do things by the book and follow policy, moving up in the organization based on their actions and successes. On the other hand, leaders follow their own intuition and may not have an authorized position in the hierarchy. According to some, a manager may have obtained his position of authority through time and loyalty to the organization or upper management, not as a result of his leadership qualities. While this has the feel of correctness, everyone can think of multiple exceptions.

"Experts" also say that managers are reactive to whatever situations happen to crop up. When problems develop, they respond. When they pursue action, it's on familiar terrain or through time-tested strategies. A leader is more emotional than a manager. A leader doesn't just react and respond but takes the initiative and generates action. A leader doesn't just say, "Something should be done"; he or she ensures something actually *gets* done. Leaders have the skill to infuse logic, data, and analysis with emotion, pride, and the will to win.

Another so-called difference: A leader is someone whom people follow through choice, but a manager must be obeyed. Theodore Roosevelt probably summed up this philosophy best when he said, "People ask the difference between a leader and a boss. … The leader works in the open, and the boss in covert. The leader leads, and the boss drives."

One more occasionally given answer to the difference is that the leader is innovative and creative, while the manager is a traditionalist. Who says? In project management any manager who is not innovative is probably not going to survive. Yes, he may use traditional tools and ideas, but in most projects, innovation is necessary for success.

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PMs have to deal with some combination of unreasonable expectations, unrealistic schedules, unworkable budgets, too few resources, impossible customers, and almost daily crises. Without creativity, innovation, and flexibility, they stumble and frequently fail.

"You manage things; you lead people," said Adm. Grace Hopper. The definition is often quoted and is another one of those sayings that sound right, even philosophical. But it's wrong. People are a resource, too, and we can't ignore the management of people.

What Makes a Manager a Leader/Manager?

That leads us to the true purpose of my article: the answer to the original question as to which is better. The answer is … drumroll … neither. The best answer is that a good leader and good manager can, and should, be one and the same. Leadership—and by that I mean being a good leader—can be learned. Sure, there are born leaders, but even more leaders are made. Let's look at some characteristics and traits of a good leader, and how you can incorporate them into your management practices to become a leader/manager.

First off, a leader must choose to lead. The project manager is put in a position of authority, but only he or she can choose to be a leader. The choice takes some work. It means being the example, setting the pace, providing vision, being an inspiration, and more.

A leader is generally a "people person." Gandhi put it this way: "I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people." Leaders communicate with their teams and the organization. They make their passion and enthusiasm for the team or organizational vision and mission contagious so that others catch it and become true believers. They fire the imaginations and build the confidence of people with whom they are associated. According to Jim Clemmons, "Leaders help people believe the impossible is possible, which makes it highly probable."

A leader provides opportunities for people to grow, both personally and professionally. He looks at their capabilities and skills. He uses those skills for the project, but at the same time looks for ways to enhance them, whether through experiences, classes, or just the sharing of information.

A leader makes other people feel important and appreciated. She excels at creating opportunities to provide rewards, recognition, and thanks to her staff. A leader creates a work environment in which people feel important and appreciated. The true leader gives the staff public credit for contributions. Mary Kay Ash, head of Mary Kay Products, describes it succinctly: "There are two things

people want more than sex and money—recognition and praise."

Powerful, positive recognition makes people feel important. It encourages them to contribute even more in the future. Good leader/managers put the praise in writing. A thank-you note or a written letter of recognition to the person, with a copy to the recipient's file, magnifies the impact of the recognition.

The good leader/manager uses vision and creativity to establish an environment of continuous improvement, making things better for his people, the project, and the organization.

The Importance of Followership

A key leadership trait is the ability to inspire "followership." A true leader makes people want to follow her. The successful leader/follower relationship inspires people to become more than they might have been without the relationship. Following an effective leader, people accomplish and achieve more than they may ever have dreamed possible.

Every manager who aspires to become a leader/manager must believe that people are important. When you act as if you believe people are important, then people will feel important. And that induces loyalty.

Let's go a little further on building loyalty. Groups are more loyal to a manager who is also a leader than a manager who is not. The leader/manager fosters loyalty by his sense of responsibility—taking the blame when things go wrong; celebrating group achievements, even minor ones; giving credit where it is due; sharing recognition; following through on promises; keeping the team informed; and all of those things that a leader provides.

Practicing simple courtesy is a powerful relationship-building tool that can assist the leader/manager. Pay attention to people and use common courtesy. Say good morning. Ask people how their weekend was. Be interested, but be sincere. Small talk is great, but listen to what your coworkers, peers, and staff members have to say. Give your full attention to the person seeking your attention. If you can't pay full attention and listen actively, set a time to meet with the person when you can. You can gain much information from the ideas and opinions of others, and you make people feel special when you listen to them without distraction.

People need to feel included, to feel in the know and a part of the actions and processes of the project. The good leader/manager provides that inclusion, which goes beyond the listening and feedback. The leader/manager shares information and plans with the team.

DoD's Acquisition Chief To Step Down

Gayle S. Putrich and Elise Castelli

Ken Krieg, the Pentagon's top acquisition official, resigned his post June 6, citing a desire to spend more time with is family.

Appointed as undersecretary of Defense for acquisition, technology and logistics in 2005, Kreig, 46, has worked in the Pentagon since 2001. Before taking on responsibility for the more than $100 billion defense acquisition machine, he worked with the senior executive council, developing initiatives to improve Defense Department management and organization. In his life before public service, Kreig was the vice president and general manager of International Papers' office and consumer paper division.

When the announcement came, Kreig was on the beach —at Normandy, honoring the 63rd anniversary of D-Day.

Krieg will leave the Pentagon on July 20 or when a successor is named, according to a Defense Department statement. No acting secretary was named at the time of the announcement.

The process to replace Kreig must be kicked off by the White House, and Defense Department officials said there has not yet been any indication of when a nominee for the president-appointed, Senate-approved post will be named.

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When there are problems, the leader/manager looks at all the options. Even if the traditional response to a problem may work, good leader/managers might still try something different for better results. By trying variations of standard actions, you may find new and better paths to success. If the new responses don't work, they don't have to be used again (although they might be tried in other circumstances); if they work better, you have evolved into more of a leader/manager.

Finally the great leader/manager has integrity and practices good ethical decision making. This builds trust— and trust within the team is critical. The trust must go both ways. The leader/manager must trust his people and the people must trust him. Leading by example can engender that trust.

Born or Made

While leadership and management are not the same, they can and should be combined. Project managers must be leaders to ensure the success of their people, projects, and the overall organization.

Some leaders are born; others are made. With effort, it is possible to learn to lead. It may not be the charismatic leadership that is pictured in books and movies, but it is the everyday kind of leadership that gets results.

The following are some leadership guidelines for the project manager:
- Have goals and be enthusiastic about reaching those goals. One of the goals must be project success.
- Set the example in actions, ethics, and work habits.
- Be creative, innovative, and flexible in problem solutions and approaches.
- Communicate—goals, values, expectations, and project status.
- Listen. That is the other side of communication and how you learn from others.
- Recognize and reward your people. Praise in public; correct in private.
- Create an environment of trust.
- Be courageous. Stand up for your people and your beliefs.
- Be loyal to your people and your organization.

Following these guidelines in your project and, for that matter, in your life, will mark you as a leader. Being a leader won't guarantee success on a project, but it sure helps—with your people behind you, working hard to support you in meeting your goals and winning your praise, how can you lose?

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