

Articles for Managers

You Gotta Get'em To Wanna 6 Roles the Modern Leader Plays

by Ian Cook



Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps managers and supervisors get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

So much is changing in our economic and business environment these years, is it any wonder that the nature of leadership is changing too? We're not talking a new fad, here, folks. Fads come and they go. Leadership—as it is progressively practiced today—is here to stay! If you manage, supervise, direct or formally influence other people, you lead them! So, just for the record, what does this new style of leadership comprise?

I have always liked this distinction: “management” is getting things done through others; “leadership” is getting others to want to get things done. Howard Gardner, chronicling some great 20th century leaders in his fascinating book, *Leading Minds*, calls a leader “an individual who, by words and/or personal example, significantly influences the thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors of...human beings.” Leadership now is really the practice of influencing.

But why is influencing becoming the preferred way? What is wrong with just telling them, from your own experience and authority base, what to do? Allow me to offer two good reasons.

“Leadership now is really the practice of influencing”

First of all, the processes to provide most products and services have become complex. No one person alone has the answer any more. People are increasingly called upon to communicate and make decisions laterally with others, rather than vertically through the boss. In my own consulting practice I am seeing more cross-functional teams, greater sharing of vital information, and more involvement in the ranks. I am frequently being asked to assist in initiatives to break down walls between those darn “silos.”

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Secondly, today's more complex work demands high levels of skill and knowledge. Employees, the so-called “knowledge workers,” who possess these assets are in great demand. They seek the challenge of contributing their ideas and using their heads in their work. This is what they are being paid for. These people do not tend to hang around when you become overly directive with them.

So, what is a well-meaning manager or supervisor supposed to do? How does he or she operate as a leader in today's emerging high performance organizations? My advice is to concentrate on six roles that, together, earn you the right to call yourself a “modern leader.”

1. Servant Leader.

Robert Greenleaf coined the term. The idea is that the best leaders see themselves as servants first. Decide whom—not what—you serve in your leadership capacity. Help them succeed in contributing to the organization, help them learn and grow, and see them as your “customer” (for your leadership services).

2. Direction Setter.

Communicate the overall goals of the company so that they are understood. Engage your people in crafting individual and team objectives that support these wider goals. If you are a unit leader, your job is to ensure that the energy and priorities of your group are aligned

with the organization's strategic direction.

3. Steward for high standards and results.

No matter how much you share decision-making power and involve your people, you are still ultimately responsible for the results being achieved and the objectives being met. Insist on high standards, for yourself, of course, and for those you lead. This means dealing with those who choose to underperform. As W. Somerset Maugham once said, "It's a funny thing about life. If you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it."

4. Motivator/Coach.

Yes, you do have a role in—but by no means 100% responsibility for—motivating your people. That direction you articulated in (2) above...add your passion about it. Enthusiasm is contagious. It is also motivating. Help them identify what they truly desire (the WIIFM, if you are in sales) from their work and career. Do what you can to help them achieve this.

5. Changemaster.

You will never stop being called upon to lead, or at least support, change initiatives. All humans, are forced on a psychological journey when faced with change. The journey takes one from "endings" through a "neutral zone" and finally into a period of "new beginnings." William Bridges' excellent book, *Managing Transitions*, lays out clearly how to manage people at each of these critical stages.

6. Role Model.

Leadership manifests itself, above all, in how you behave. On what to you focus your attention? your time? your questions? Do you act consistently with your values? For example, if you espouse an open, trusting work culture, do your people find it "safe" to speak their mind to you?

Make no mistake about it! These six roles are at the core of leadership in the coming years. Give them a central place in your set of attitudes and skills and you will be better, do better and feel a whole lot better as you serve others...from out in front.

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