

Re-frame Leadership: *Jettison the Cult of Personality*

Lewis Hollweg, Ph.D.

SUCCESSFUL LEADERS ARE:

Courageous
Visionary
Charismatic
Passionate
Consensus Building
Confident
Bold
Etc

THEY CAN ALSO BE:

Controlling
Petty
Neurotic
Insensitive
Arrogant
Aloof
Manipulating
Etc.

OZ'S WIZARD?

If all of these disparate descriptions of leaders are valid, maybe the labels are just smoke and magic with little substance and value: merely a reflection of the perceptions of the observers. What then is the real essence of leadership?

The cult of leadership personality is alive and thriving in American business but cracks may be appearing. Jim Collins (Fortune, Feb. 2001) is accelerating the awareness that the trait and personality theory of leadership is a dead-end street. This is not to say that there are not some correlations between individual traits and leadership success. However, a review of the research indicates that, at best, these correlations are .30 to .40, which translates into a 10-15% accuracy of predicting leadership differences. What accounts for the other 85% of the difference between success and failure no one really seems to know. This state of affairs is not very helpful to those wanting a more definitive guide to leadership improvement (maybe this is why we have so much trouble developing leaders).

Most of us rely on anecdotal descriptions of great leaders and have fixed in our imagination a composite vision of the ideal leader: how he/she looks, acts, speaks, thinks and handles problems. When asked, most of us can describe this ideal person with clear detail. These aspirational models provide us with guidelines for our behavior and even fuel our guilt when we fail to live up to our expectations. However, there seems to be little evidence of their effectiveness.

CORNERSTONES OF THE CAUSAL CHAIN

If there is little real clarity of what makes a great leader, what do I do about my development and the development of others? Well, maybe it is time to re-frame our view of leadership and focus on the leadership process and end results rather than on characteristics and traits. Let us start with the end goal and work backward. Clearly, we are all interested in results. Getting our team to achieve our goals or vision overshadows anything else as long as it is accomplished within our value parameters. Do we really care about a leader's particular style or behavior? Our experience tells us that many different leadership styles and

Copyright © 2003 Batrus Hollweg International Selection Services, Ltd (BHI)

personalities can work equally as well in achieving results. If this is the case, what differentiates successful from unsuccessful leaders? By focusing on the three cornerstones that build successful teams, we can start to extrapolate leadership activities that power success. A BHI meta analysis of team research shows that successful leaders:

1. Continually build the team's *talent* by increasing the *abilities* and *knowledge*.
2. Accelerate team *energy* through increasing *meaningfulness* and *respect* at work.
3. Foster team *focus* through *goal* and *role clarity*.

The causal chain:

Talent × Energy × Focus = Team Performance

Keeping these causal links in mind, we can now start to describe a leadership model that identifies activities that drive performance. Leadership behaviors and actions become important in how they impact the three cornerstones, not because they replicate some ideal image. Additionally, each leader can use his/her own set of unique strengths and skills to maximize the *Talent*, *Energy* and *Focus* of the team. For example, there are multiple methods of increasing team talent. One leader might have an exceptional ability to identify talented and knowledgeable team members. Another leader may have an excellent aptitude for designing a selection process that results in highly talented team members. Another may be a skilled group facilitator who guides the team in building a great selection system that powers team talent. The common theme between these leaders in this example is that they understand the causal chain and have the insight necessary to recognize their strengths, not that they are similar in personality traits.

UNSHACKLING CREATIVITY

In a recent leadership development session with an executive, I asked about his multi-rater feedback results. The executive cited his poor communication skills and perceived aloofness as a frequently mentioned barrier to his effectiveness. As a strong introvert, the prospect of initiating significantly more one-on-ones and speaking in front of groups was frightening to him. He was very discouraged in facing the daunting task of becoming more extroverted. I quickly explained the causal chain cornerstones to him and the goal: to

increase the energy and focus on his team through better communication. Then I asked him to re-frame his leadership issue. Instead of changing a personality trait (introvert to extrovert), his challenge was to use his considerable other talents and his creativity to attack his "communication" problem. A broad smile broke out on his face and he rapidly listed 5-6 alternative communication methods that could reduce the negative perceptions of others. The leadership development process became manageable and exciting by jettisoning the personality issues and re-framing it.

In Peak Performance Cultures: A Sustainable Competitive Edge, (Hollweg 2001) the empowerment process is identified as a major sustainable competitive edge. By making the creative use of each leader's strengths the centerpiece of our leadership model we begin to tap into the reservoir of innovation that exists in our employee base. Most leadership models are more rigid and train us to do it this way or act like this and focus on behaviors that are collectively seen as traits. Unfortunately, these restrictive methods ultimately decrease innovation and reduce creative energy. It is the one-size-fits-all approach to development (see Seeds and Hooks, Not Loaves and Fish, (Hollweg 2001).

At BHI, we believe that asking important questions of leaders based on the leadership causal model prepares them for sustainable success. Each of us must ask ourselves:

- How can I best use my strengths to build team *talent*, *energy* and *focus*?
- How do my actions and behaviors impact each cornerstone on a day-to-day basis?
- What skills do I need to develop to have a greater influence in creating more *talent*, *energy* and *focus* on my team?

From our research and experience, BHI has developed an in-depth peak performance model. This model is a philosophy, process and set of tools that powers increased performance in teams and organizations. Please call, e-mail or write for more information.

Lewis Hollweg, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist and Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Batrus Hollweg International, a Dallas-based Human Resource Management Consulting Firm.