

Strength-focused Transformational Leadership

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Reading a recent executive-level HR article on leadership, I was struck by how the Human Resource community is currently defining leadership. The authors began by asking the question, "What is leadership?" and then answered the question by identifying a group of key leadership competencies. They listed four major task areas that, in their views, differentiated effective leaders from ineffective leaders: 1. Providing direction, 2. Assuring alignment, 3. Building commitment and, 4. Facing adaptive challenges. The authors stated that these four task areas reflect current thinking and research about leadership effectiveness. My immediate reaction was, "You're kidding! No wonder HR professionals are too often left out of the strategic business process." Not one word in this supposedly high-level article mentioned **results**. It's as if leadership is all about activities rather than accomplishments.

RESULTS AND LEADERSHIP

All business stakeholders know that when you drill to the core of business, it is all about sales minus expenses. No matter what business leaders do, if they don't produce a profit the company will fail at some point (even, as it turns out, in the dot.com world). For some, this may sound so elementary that they assume that all good leaders have to produce results so we really don't have to discuss it. My view is different. If results are not always a critical part of defining leadership, we can be easily sidetracked into leadership tasks that may not help achieve core goals. Great leaders are ultimately defined by great results.

I know that it is not enough to define leadership as achievements. All of us want to know how to create these results. How do I become better in my own leadership? What can I do to help others be more effective leaders (achieve greater results)? Leadership methods and tasks are an integral part of leadership results but do not, by themselves, differentiate good leaders from poor leaders. No quantitative longitudinal research on leadership that I know of has predicted anything more than 10-15% of leadership effectiveness using traits, intelligence of methods.

Not long ago, I had an animated discussion with an HR vice president about a well-known rather tyrannical leader who built one of the world's most respected companies. This HR professional argued that we should

not define this authoritarian C.E.O. as a great leader because of his offensive methods. While I don't hold this C.E.O. up as an ideal, he clearly achieved great operational and financial results for many years and all his stakeholders were grateful to have him at the helm of this company. Methods do count but at what point did methods supplant results in defining leadership? Where does all this leave us?

THE LEADERSHIP MYSTERY

Since no one appears to have cracked the genetic code for leadership, leadership models that build an effective framework for evaluating and developing leaders become very important. There are hundreds of these leadership theories available but most are too complex to follow or focus solely on methods or specific skills.

Many of these theories of leadership assume that there is a common set of traits that separates great leaders from the mediocre, i.e., there exists a group of leadership competencies that all of us must acquire in order to be great leaders. At BHI, we surveyed a group of well-known books on leadership and quickly identified over 200 characteristics that authors identified as being attributes of successful leaders. In addition, there may be an almost infinite variety of tasks, activities and organizational systems that have increased results in one organization or another (every publication lists best practices). Confusing, isn't it?

Our research and experience at BHI shows that the major drivers of measurable results can be categorized into 3 major leadership outcomes:

1. Building the *talent* on the team
2. Increasing individual and team *energy*
3. Clarifying individual and team *focus*

If we substitute these 3 powerful outcomes of leadership in place of the 4 activities of leaders cited in the Human Resource article, we can, I believe, start to creatively maximize each individual leader's strengths. These three fundamental leadership outcomes tie measurable results closer to the individual's effort without dictating the exact method of achieving these results. If each leader effectively and consistently increases the *talent*, *energy* and *focus* on his/her team or organization, he/she significantly increases their probability of successfully achieving their goals.

As long as leaders operate within moral and ethical boundaries, do we care how they build the talent, energy and focus on their team? Do these leaders have to lead others in a certain way or their results are invalid? Of course not! We admire individuals who have accomplished great results by their own creative insight, methods and skills. Unfortunately, uniqueness almost always defies replication. This is what frustrates us in our goal of developing new leaders or in increasing our own leadership capabilities.

BECOMING A STRENGTH-BASED LEADER

At BHI, we have developed a leadership model that we believe bridges the gaps between individual traits, methods, and results and integrates them together with an approach that focuses on maximizing both individual and organizational strengths. Our BHI Peak Performance leadership model strives for both power and economy so that it can be effectively implemented on a daily basis. We begin with a set of 4 fundamental premises:

1. Effective leadership is all about achieving results. There are no great leaders without great results.
2. Most financial results are driven by 3 Peak Performance cornerstones:
 - a. Team Talent
(knowledgeable and capable team members)
 - b. Team Energy
(passion, stamina, and intensity)
 - c. Team Focus
(clarity of goals and roles)
3. Every leader must creatively use his/her unique strengths to build and maximize the *talent*, *energy* and *focus* cornerstones of their team. Strength-based leadership is a fundamental building block of leadership.
4. Creative use of our leadership talents requires relentless self-insight.

GOOD NEWS – BAD NEWS

The good news is that many types of leaders are successful. The bad news is that it can be very elusive to identify an exact model for us to follow. As an illustrative example, two different leaders can have the same impact on the team. Steve is an extroverted, people-oriented leader who has had a good deal of past success using his assertive teambuilding skills to create energy around team goals to achieve results. Beth has a technical background with a low-keyed, analytical systems approach and has had success

through building employee involvement through more detailed processes, procedures, and systems. Her influence is felt through these smooth running organizational and work systems, not by the impact of her personality. Each of these two leaders comes to the team with unique traits, skills and experiences. This individuality makes his/her leadership strategy and style different from any one else. However, results can be very similar even with big differences in leadership methods. Both styles are able to use their strengths to achieve the team's mission.

Given that each of us has the potential to achieve excellent results with our own unique set of strengths and weaknesses, how do we go about maximizing our leadership skills to create more value for our team and organization?

1. Self-insight has been and will always be the most powerful force in maximizing our leadership capabilities.
2. A gap analysis between our own present capabilities and organizational leadership competencies can help target our development of more effective leadership skills.
3. A deep awareness of our own capacities combined with an understanding of talent in the team and business environment sets the stage for great leadership.

In this three dimensional puzzle, lies the answer to achieving outstanding leadership results. It typically takes risk-taking and persistence to find the maximum solution.

STRENGTH-BASED LEADER RESULTS

1. The first step is almost always greater self-awareness. Interviews, 360° Feedback questionnaires and assessments are all tools that can accelerate self-understanding. However, a mind is like a parachute, it is only effective when it's open. (See Peter Drucker's *Managing Oneself*, Harvard Business Review, Reprint 99204, March-April 1999).
2. Clarify the desired results. Targeted and specific goals are much easier to work toward. Global leadership goals often confuse more than help.
3. Focus our leadership on the 3 cornerstones that drive most team and organizational results.
 - a. Team Talent
 - b. Team Energy
 - c. Team Focus

4. Work through a series of straightforward questions with 1, 2, & 3 always in the background.
 - a. Do you have the talent on your team to achieve the targeted results? If yes, how can you maximize the use of this talent? If no, how can you acquire the necessary talent? Talent is all about the size of the team's engine (maximum horsepower capacity).
 - b. How can you use your leadership capabilities to increase the team's energy? Does your team have the drive, stamina and passion to achieve? If not, why not? Energy is the fuel for your team's engine. Without fuel, even big engines sputter and die.
 - c. Is your team and organization focused on priorities that drive results? If not, how can you use the team's talent and energy to correct the problem? Focus is like the road map for your vehicle. Without it, you may spend all your talent, energy and time going around in circles.

All of us are aware of Peter Drucker's famous principle: It is the question not the answer that drives success. My experience is that leaders who regularly ask these questions about talent, energy and focus are tapping

into a powerful force for the creative use of their own strengths and the strengths of their team. Because these questions re-frame the issues, they allow innovative answers to bubble to the surface in a non-threatening, empowering manner. Try it and see what happens in your team.

Strength-focused Transformational Leadership

- Each of us has our own unique set of skills, abilities and potential.
- Peak performance comes from matching our unique capabilities with our responsibilities.
- Great leadership results are produced by maximizing our strengths.
- Overcoming competency gaps turbo-charges the use of these strengths.

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