Leadership Is 'Developing People through Their Work'

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, January 17, 2009
(items in red were added after publication)

Dear Dennis:
I am a manager in a large organization. My boss suggested I prepare for future responsibilities by doing more leading and less managing. Can you help me understand the difference? Signed, PUZZLED.
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Dear PUZZLED:
Only your boss knows for sure what she is advocating. However, I can provide perspective to help you orchestrate your next conversation. When you talk with your boss again, you can mutually explore possible future roles and potential adjustments in your behavior.

The differences between "managing" and "leading" could fill a book! However, the differences are mostly academic, since most roles mix some "manager" responsibilities and some "leader" responsibilities.

Start by thinking about your current responsibilities. Sort each daily activity by whether you think it is more "managing" or more "leading." This will give you a start on understanding your boss' perspective.

All work is a "process," a series of step-by-step events. Managers assure the completion of processes that reliably lead to known, desirable outcomes. Managers execute the work through people and other resources.

To keep our economy healthy, we need to execute a lot of work! So the need for competent managers to organize and plan the work, and especially to resolve unexpected problems, will never go away!

Leaders cause people to see their contributions as having value to their teammates, to customers, and to the future success of the organization. Leaders inspire individuals to put energy against creating a more satisfying future. Leaders encourage people to continually improve the existing processes and results.

Another way of thinking about this is that managers do things right and leaders determine what the right things are. Obviously, both are necessary. Again, sometimes the same person is doing both of these.

Managers make sure that the priorities the organization chooses to pursue are performed properly, so that the desired outcomes are achieved or exceeded.

However, organizations have more available opportunities than they have resources (time, money, physical space, etc.). Leaders prioritize the many opportunities, determining which are appropriate to pursue and which would be distractions (interesting as they may be!). They then help individuals understand how to move from their current situation to a clearly defined, desired future state.

"Management" is getting work done through people. "Leadership" focuses on developing people and using the real work they do as the vehicle for growth. Either way, the work is accomplished. The difference is in where you put the emphasis.

If you focus on executing the process, the work will get done. Over time, however, the daily grind wears people down. If you put your emphasis on helping people find ways to expand their awareness and skills, you build people up and make them stronger. Not only are the desired outcomes achieved, you have an organization with even greater capacity than before.

As managers grow in responsibility, they usually become more involved in building future leaders and in making decisions on which opportunities the organization should pursue. My guess is that your boss is asking you to consider how you might build more of those kinds of activities into your existing role.

(For the thoughts below, reference another article I published on February 2, 2006 entitled "Vision vs. Current Reality.") Managers tend to look at the current reality and consider options for "What can we do from this point forward?" They make their choices based on the organization's values and what they believe will optimize the results. The manager then shares the decision for how to proceed with those who will carry on the work, then oversees the execution of that work.

Leaders, on the other hand, start by imagining the vision of the organization three or four years out. This concept of "what could be" is always in their consciousness---it is what gives them passion and "pulls" them daily into the future. Their comments to others are always referencing this imagined vision.

Faced with a challenging current reality, leaders start with the mental image of the achieved vision, then work backwards in six month increments thinking about what needs to be done to move toward the vision during that period. Sequentially working backwards towards current reality, they eventually imagine the six months right in front of them.

Considering the current reality facing the organization, the options generated through this process are usually somewhat different from the options generated through the process described three paragraphs above. Even if the options are identical, however, often the options <u>chosen</u> through this process are different.

The leader then works to align the individuals who will carry on the work with the thought process taken to this point. The leader invites input and additional thoughts. Collaboratively, the entire team agrees on the action steps to pursue, and the specifics of the plan are worked out and executed.

The allure of upward mobility in our society is great, PUZZLED. However, the glamour associated with being a leader of others is quite exaggerated! Our world needs really good managers, so also explore with your boss some potential future roles that would make terrific use of your skills in managing.
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