

Are You Leading Leaders?

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Think about the people you lead. Are they leaders? Or are they followers?

I speculate that most people reading this column today will quickly respond that they are leading followers. Our society tends to group and stereotype people. And we tend to think in terms of contrasts. So most of us tend to associate followers with leaders.

What would it take to start thinking of yourself as a leader of leaders? What would happen if you started treating the people you lead as interdependent leaders rather than compliant followers?

Think about the stereotypical concepts you have in your brain about “followers.” Contrast that with the stereotypical concepts you have in your brain about “leaders.”

With one conscious choice, you could start leading leaders! What might be different about your behavior if you were leading leaders? How would your expectations change?

Would you hold people accountable in a different way? Would you expect more proposed solutions to problems? Would you expect more collaboration? Would you expect more initiative?

Most leaders are comfortable leading followers. The thought of leading leaders may be threatening to some. If it's not clear yet, I'm really encouraging you to consider a paradigm shift with this article!

It takes a lot less work to lead followers than it does to lead leaders! Followers have questions about what direction we're headed, when we expect to get there, and how difficult it will be to accomplish the journey. Their presumption—and probably yours—is that you will provide the answers to these kinds of questions.

When you lead leaders, however, they ask different questions. “Why are we headed in that direction?” “How does that approach fit with our overall strategy?” “Aren't we overlooking what our customers will need next year?” “How would we know success if we achieved it?”

When you lead leaders, your role shifts from “answer provider” to “culture creator.” You transition from being the person who people go to for answers to the person who people go to for mentoring and coaching. You invite the other leaders to consider a variety of options for any decision they are about to make—and to evaluate the benefits and costs of each of those options more thoroughly. Analytical decision-making becomes widely adopted across your organization.

When you lead leaders, you no longer put pressure on yourself to have all the answers. The pressures are different, however. You have to stay in contact close enough that each person continues to collaborate rather than starts to work independently. Independent capability is healthy, but the objective is to work interdependently with the other leaders in the organization. All the leaders working together are far stronger than any one of the leaders working independently.

Leading leaders is far more powerful than leading followers. Leading leaders keeps you much more open to seeking improvement and challenging each other. Leading leaders keeps you sharp! Leading leaders gives you great colleagues, collaborators, and partners for the future.

There's a downside. Some individuals, maybe some of your best people, will leave your organization. It's a cost of doing business that you may not have experienced before. But it's not all bad. Many of those empowered leaders will come back to benefit you in the form of future suppliers, future customers, future political leaders in your district, etc.

It may be difficult to imagine leading leaders. And it may be genuinely more difficult in the short-term to lead leaders. But the potential advantages in the long run are far superior!