

Leadership is Influence, not Control—Part 1

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Perhaps the biggest misconception I find as I work with leaders is the “command and control” concept of leadership. Leaders and followers alike understand position power. We’ve all experienced it.

The perception of the power of the positional leader comes, I believe, from three sources. First, in America, we value independence. Our history of rebellion against the British and our freedom of speech legitimize Americans to **insist** on their way when they have power and to **resist** when they don’t. Please think about that statement as it relates to you personally and to individuals you have known.

Second, many positional leaders have military experience. The power given to hierarchy in the military comes from the need to be prepared to function immediately in an emergency. However, the experience of military service, combined with the aura associated with military heroes, causes many positional leaders to strive for a “kick butt and take names” approach to exercising their authority.

In addition, the history of industrial development in America provides a pervasive foundation for the power mentality. A hundred years ago, there were only a few people with money and many people with no money. The people with money invested in machinery and factories. People without money were willing to offer their hands and backs to obtain the means to feed their families.

The people with money hired managers to order supplies, make decisions, and direct activities. The managers were rewarded for work output. They were an eager audience to find new or improved ways to increase performance.

Enter a guy named Frederick Taylor, author in 1909 of *Principles of Scientific Management*. His philosophy included a clear delineation of authority, separating planning from the execution of the operation. He advocated task specialization and incentive schemes for workers. He introduced the concept of “management by exception,” a process for finding and eliminating deficiencies.

Based heavily on Taylor’s guidance, managers treated workers like extensions of the machines they operated. Money was presumed to be the only motivator. Pay was based not only on the amount of time worked, but also the number of units produced per unit of time.

Because there were plenty of people needing money, workers were treated as expendable commodities. Workers who failed to perform as commanded were dismissed. Some managers were excessive in their demands. (The development of unions as a way workers could collectively resist management abuse is another story, perhaps to be explored in a future article.)

Fast forward a hundred years to 2009. Although the circumstances are quite different, some leaders are still using antiquated Frederick Taylor techniques. Yet today’s work is no longer physical labor. Manufacturing and construction jobs still exist, but few require significant strength or manual dexterity. Sophisticated machines now accomplish most of those operations.

We have progressed to the era of “knowledge work.” Many professionals are as intelligent (and in some specialty skill areas, even more competent than) their managers.

Also, people work for more than money these days. They want to feel a sense of contribution and accomplishment in their careers. Further, because of the nature of today’s work, months and sometimes years are required to develop the needed skills. For this reason, people are no longer interchangeable commodities; excessive turnover can be devastating for an organization.

Knowing this, why do so many leaders continue to execute command and control behaviors? Because doing so is easy, it feels good (gives the illusion of being in control), and fear works, at least in the short-term. Threatened with any kind of retribution, most people will do what is required to avoid the “or else.”

Further, many leaders just don’t know how to function differently. They’ve not had role models, mentors, or coaches to help them learn alternative methods that develop long-term commitment and a desire to serve. Yet there are far more effective ways of engaging today’s workers, and I’ll cover that next week.

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