

Leadership is Influence, not Control

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Perhaps the biggest misconception I find as I work with leaders is the "command-and-control" approach to leadership. Leaders and followers alike understand position power. We've all experienced it.

The concept of a controlling leader comes, I believe, from three sources. First, in America, we value independence. Our history of independence from the British and our freedom of speech seem to compel Americans to insist on their way when they are in positions of power and to resist when they aren't.

Second, the directive power given to the hierarchy in the military comes from the need to be prepared to function immediately in an emergency. However, the model of military command and control causes many positional leaders to strive for a "kick butt and take names" approach to exercising their authority.

Third, the history of industrial development in America provides a pervasive foundation for the power mentality. A hundred and fifty years ago, there were 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 and house their families.

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

Enter a guy in 1909 named Frederick Taylor, author 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.

Based heavily on Taylor's guidance, managers treated workers like extensions of the machines they operated. Money was presumed to be the motivator. Pay was based on the number of units produced.

Because there were plenty of people needing money and job skills were relatively easy to learn, workers were treated as expendable commodities. Workers who failed to perform as commanded were dismissed--and easily replaced. And seeing this happen to a team member kept the others in line.

Fast-forward over a hundred years to the present. Today's work is no longer primarily physical labor. Though manufacturing and construction jobs still exist, few require significant strength or manual dexterity. Sophisticated, artificially intelligent machines now accomplish most of those operations.

We have progressed to the era of "knowledge work." Many professionals are as intelligent as (and sometimes more competent in specialty skill areas than) their managers.

Also, people work for more than money these days. They want to feel a sense of accomplishment and purpose. Further, months and sometimes years are required to develop needed skills. People are no longer interchangeable commodities. Excessive turnover can be devastating for an organization.

Knowing this, why do many leaders continue to execute command and control behaviors? Because doing so is easy, it gives the illusion of being in control, history and the legends of strong past leaders "getting ahead" remain, and fear works, at least in the short term. Threatened with any kind of retribution from the boss, most people will do what is required to avoid the "or else."

Further, many leaders 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. Though "servant leadership" seems to be a relatively modern concept (with few high-profile role models), it's been quietly effective for thousands of years. We often don't see or have role models for servant leadership, because servant leaders avoid publicity or glory, redirecting all that onto their teams. (See the article "What Services Do Servant Leaders Provide?" on my website--address below.)

A contemporary authority on leadership, Stephen Covey, provides insight into the difference between control and influence. In his best-selling 1989 book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey points out that you directly control only a small portion of your life. Your control involves personal choices, such as the meaning you make of situations, how you decide to spend your time and energy, and the specific actions you choose to take in response to a given situation.

Many of the items that you don't control directly, you can influence. Another of today's authorities on leadership, John Maxwell, asserts that "Leadership is influence--nothing more, nothing less." This quote appears four times in his 1998 book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. Nowhere in the book, however, does Maxwell say, or even imply, that leadership is exercising control.

You can influence others if you understand and relate to their values. More than anything else, our values drive our behaviors. We all have values, but many people are not able to easily articulate and explain them. But they know when their values are being violated, and they don't like it!

For example, Baby Boomers sometimes have difficulty understanding choices made by Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z contributors. It takes time to listen and understand what's important to each unique person. Presuming that what you value is also what's important to everyone else can lead to genuine misunderstandings. (See the article entitled "Your Colleagues Often Don't Think Like You Think," available on my website.)

If you index into what others want in their careers and lives, you'll find ways to engage them that will be beneficial for them personally and for the organization. Isn't it far more effective when individuals make choices because it's what they consider the right thing to do rather than because you've forced them?

A command-and-control approach usually results in people doing only what's required to avoid negative retribution. Under pressure, people tend toward one of two extremes. They become compliant and passive, exhibiting minimal commitment. Or they become angry and rebellious, exhibiting even less commitment. Neither is conducive to a reliable, predictable operation--or to retaining competent people.

Sustained success, innovation, and improvement come more readily to individuals who are committed and enthusiastically engaged. Such a condition is generated far more frequently by a leader who understands that the power of productive influence consistently trumps the application of position power.

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