

Your Position of Authority May not be “Leadership”

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“This would be a great job if it weren’t for the people!” You’ve heard that comment before, right? Maybe you’ve even said it or thought it.

Leadership is not merely exercising the authority associated with a position. In fact, leadership is not associated with position at all. The position of authority that you fill may be a leadership deception.

You may be in the position that you fill for reasons not at all related to leadership. For example, as an entrepreneur, you may have started a company many years ago. You own the company and direct the operations daily. That does not automatically guarantee that you are an effective leader.

Or maybe you were appointed to the position you hold based on outstanding execution of some technical or functional skills. Perhaps you have good financial planning and accounting skills. Or maybe you know your product or the selling of your product extremely well. You now may oversee sales people or accountants. That doesn’t necessarily mean you have strong leadership skills.

Many people who are in positions of authority don’t even think like leaders. They think like managers. They have a series of tasks that need to be performed reliably. Raw materials (information or physical goods) come into your organization, people utilize equipment and tools to process it, and some finished product leaves your organization, directed toward either an internal or external customer.

Please don’t get me wrong. You need reliable, repeatable processes to provide the products and services that satisfy the mission of your organization. But just because you have authority over some people doesn’t mean you have strong leadership skills.

I speculate that your thinking is shaped at least partially by your organization’s accounting system. When you generate a balance sheet, what are the major assets that are listed? If your organization is typical, land, buildings, equipment, and tools are itemized and a current value is identified.

Although each of those is important, they all become rather worthless without people. Many companies claim that “People are our greatest asset!” Yet individuals are not even recognized on a balance sheet.

If you use people to optimize your land, buildings, equipment, and tools, you tend more toward management than leadership. Again, there may be nothing wrong with that. I just encourage you to take a fresh look at your perspective.

Do you use people and value the equipment and other non-human resources in your organization? Or do you value the people who use the things the accounting system recognizes as assets? (Many people, even in highly respected organizations, complain that “Nobody seems to appreciate me!”)

If people are really your greatest asset, how do you help them align with the organizational vision? Do you work to find the appropriate engagement for each person? Do you consider what each individual loves to do? Do you know what inspires him or her?

When you help make meaning of a situation, and people chime in, “Hey, I hadn’t thought of that,” that’s leadership. When you offer up options for how to address a given situation, and people spontaneously respond with “Wow, that’s a great idea,” that’s leadership. When people listen to your suggestion for which option to pursue and thoughtfully agree, “Yeah, count me in,” that’s leadership.

If people do what you suggest because they have to, that’s authority. When people do what you suggest because they want to, that’s leadership. Leadership is influence, not control.

You can simply be a member of the team and still be a powerful influence. You can also be the designated leader of the team and be resisted. If you have power over others, you may have authority. But when you have power with others, you are a leader.

Look, I don't want to make you mad. I'm just trying to help you take a fresh look at this relationship you have with the people you serve.

Some of you may have read that last sentence and thought, "Hey, wait a minute. These people serve me! I don't serve them!" That's a pretty definite sign that you have authority, but you haven't quite figured out what's necessary to lead people.

Leadership is all about service. The leader serves the members of the team with direction, consistency, opportunity, resources, clear expectations, feedback, respect, and recognition.

Am I pushing on a technicality here? Maybe. I'm just trying to raise your awareness.

If you think your job would be wonderful if it weren't for the uncooperative people who look to you for direction, you're probably in a position of authority. If you think your job is wonderful because of the exceptional people you serve, you probably exercise significant leadership influence!

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