

Media Article



Vocational Guidance Services

What is Leadership?

I've been away, and return to Kenya in the middle of major leadership change. Leadership, and what makes a good or bad leader, is a topic that has fascinated occupational psychologists and historians for many a year. Leadership not only makes or breaks the success of countries, but also organizations and the teams within those organizations.

Being a good leader means being a contribution of many different things – and, interestingly, many conflicting attributes as well. For instance, leaders should be ambitious, with the desire to excel in their chosen field, but at the same time, the best leaders work not for themselves alone, but for the good of others in their organization. So whilst leaders may be powerful, they have to put the needs of others before their own interests.

Many leaders are outgoing and confident. Without strong communicators at the top, an organization often is left to operate like a headless chicken – that is – not very effectively! So whilst we would rank communication and confidence as key for a strong leader, just as important for that leader's success will be the ability to listen. In fact, it is very important that a leader should be able to listen to accept criticism, alongside being open to personal development. A leader who thinks knows it all and have nothing to learn is a dangerous thing.

Companies thrive under leaders who are bold, and willing to take calculated risks, by seizing new opportunities. However, an element of prudence is also important, as time spent planning and paying attention to detail is also key to success.

Many leaders do well by recognizing the importance of tradition, and do not meddle in an organization's structure or procedures unless they are not working. Radicals who want to show how important they are by reinventing the organization tend not to be too popular! But, that said, it is important that leaders be imaginative and do drive change, when needed, because without change, an organization quickly becomes stagnant, inefficient and uncompetitive. Openness to new ideas will be key.

So, you can see, being a strong leader is mostly a tricky balancing act. The most delicate balance though is the balance between wanting to lead for recognition and power whilst leading for altruistic reasons. Let me be clear – there is nothing wrong with giving leaders recognition; in fact, many people find being recognized for their contribution as a more motivating factor in their work than pure money. Leaders who are motivated by recognition will look for opportunities to make an impact and will want to work in an organization that values and applauds good performance.

Leaders who are motivated by power will be hardworking and driven in their goal to get to the top. Whilst we should respect their innate belief in themselves, we should also hope that they will use their leadership to motivate and empower others.

To go back to the main point though, whilst many leaders are driven by the need for recognition and power, the best leaders balance that with altruistic motivation. They use their power and status in the organization for the good of others. They have a balance between personal attainment and holistic development – using their abilities to develop not just the organization but the community it operates within and relies on. Leaders who are motivated by altruistic reasons often develop strong corporate social responsibility programmes and encourage co-workers to assist one another, build morale and volunteer their time. In the run up to the festive period, that seems like a very good reason to lead!

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