

Leadership: less emphasis on charisma, more on development

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Organisations and institutions have a keen need for leadership at all levels. And judging by the turn out at presentations I give on the subject, many people are interested in *being* leaders. However, as I have said in a previous article (*How to Develop a Range of Leadership Styles*, available at <http://www.bassclusker.com/info/articles.aspx#indiv>) much of what is written and said on the subject focuses unhelpfully on 'charismatic leadership'. While charisma is undoubtedly a powerful force, it's hard to see the value of a lot of this punditry for budding leaders, or the organisations who needs them, for the following reasons:

- Charisma is in the eye of the beholder. Here are some names often considered charismatic: Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Barack Obama. Elvis Presley, The Dalai Lama. First, you may agree or disagree with these names (for example, many people can see it in Mandela, but find that Blair leaves them cold).
- There's no proof that charisma is *necessary* for leadership success: Bill Gates isn't charismatic, and neither is John McCain. And just because people will follow you doesn't mean you are going in a good direction – some people experience Osama Bin Laden as charismatic, as others did Benito Mussolini.
- Even if charisma is a leadership asset, it's doubtful it can be cultivated. I am sure you can help people become more socially skilled and better at interpersonal influence, but truly charismatic? The results of such attempts will more likely resemble Woody Allen getting ready for a date by making James Bond faces in the mirror.
- We need leadership *at all levels* in our organisations: can you imagine the chaos in a firm managed exclusively by clones of Nelson Mandela, or Richard Branson or Alan Sugar?

It's much more effective to focus, not on ephemeral, hard-to-pin-down qualities with a dubious link to the desired result, but on observable, learnable behaviours; to ask: "What do effective leaders DO?", and "How can you get more of your people in your organisation doing the same?"

It's about *results*

Here's a very pragmatic definition of leadership behaviour from James Cash Penney, founder of the US retail chain which bears his name:

"My definition of an executive's job is brief and to the point. It is simply this:
Getting things done through other people."

This might not be the whole story on leadership, but it has some important virtues:

- Everyone can understand it and agree on what it means
- You can measure it
- You can improve it in a clear and incontrovertible way.

The ability to get things done through other people is vital, and its absence is a major limit to the growth of businesses and of individual careers. If you can't confidently delegate responsibility for results, you can't think and act strategically, and if you can't act strategically, your direction will be determined by the competition, the economy, your customers, your suppliers, your employees, and who knows what other random factors – hardly a position of leadership.

Why is getting things done through other people difficult?

Anyone who has tried it knows that getting things done through other people can be extraordinarily difficult, even when the request is reasonable, the other person has the capability, and they say to your face that they are willing to do it.

You usually can't just order them. The only organisations where that works tend to be military ones. If you are in the Parachute Regiment, for example, an order to jump out of a C130 is formally an order from the Queen, so you better jump. It is what you signed up to.

Such conditions don't any longer obtain outside the military, if they ever did. Businesses are less formal and less hierarchical. People are much less deferential than they were only a few decades ago. Rightly or wrongly, the reason "Because the boss says so" doesn't cut much ice these days.

This is true throughout the private and public sectors, but special mention should be reserved for professional service firms, especially partnerships. As an illustration, David Maister wrote a book about the challenges of being a Managing Partner in a law firm with the subtitle "Herding cats".

So if you can't order them, how about carrots and sticks? (or Reward Power and Coercive Power in the terms of French and Raven's famous Five Bases of Power). This sounds more promising: decide what you want people to do and then 'motivate' them through rewards and punishments.

Carrots and sticks will definitely get people to do things. The problem is, as Figure 1 illustrates, you have to keep providing the rewards and punishments in order to maintain the desired direction and interdict the undesired one. The task-master is kept as busy as the slaves.

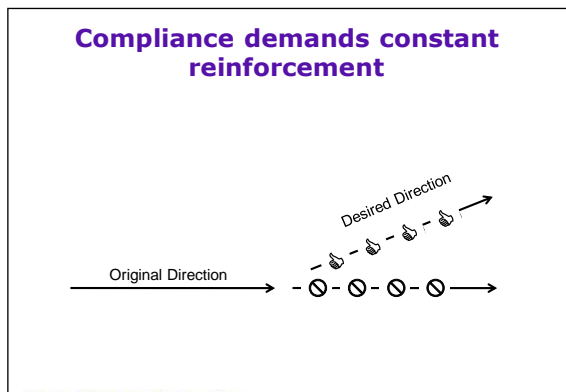


Figure 1. © A. Weiss, used with permission.

As Alan Weiss points out, you don't motivate people this way, you just move them. There is no basis for that vitally needed delegation here – the task-master has to constantly 'micromanage'. And no delegation means severe limits on your ability to grow your business.

Here's the nub of the issue in a nutshell: you CAN'T motivate people (I love causing audiences' eyes to pop out with this observation).

In truth, people are already motivated – even the ones you think are not. The laziest good-for-nothing is motivated: to avoid hassle, responsibility and effort – you can *move* them with threats or bribes, but that's as good as it will get until they decide their priorities have changed.

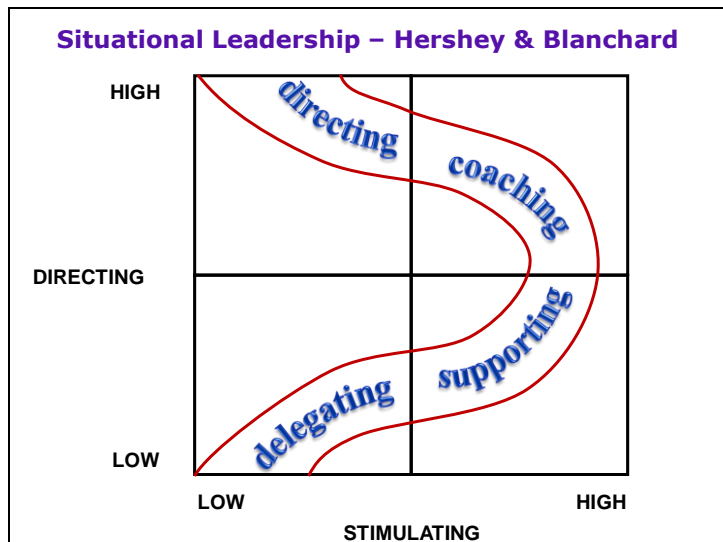
On the other hand, your best employee is also motivated: perhaps to pursue a rewarding career, contribute to an exciting, worthwhile enterprise, support family members etc. These motivations are already there, and a good leader taps into them.

The Leader as an Educator

The origin of the word educate is, of course, 'to draw out'. And it's extremely useful to think about leadership as a process of education. Lest this seems touchy-feely, consider that education systems were a major, explicit plank of Jack Welch's huge success at GE. Listen to him interviewed, and it is clear that Welch is a vocational educator. And no-one ever accused 'Neutron Jack' of being touchy-feely.

Clients find the following framework very helpful as they learn to 'get things done through other people', and as they commensurately teach their followers to accept the required accountability. It is only one way of looking at leadership behaviour of course (although as I like to joke in presentations, it does enjoy the particular virtue of being the correct one...).

The framework comes from Hershey and Blanchard and is called Situational Leadership. The idea is that you vary your objectives and behaviour with your people according to what stage in their development (the 'situation') they have reached – see Figure 2.



The framework looks at the *range* of leader behaviours in terms of a) how directing they are, and b) how much stimulation they provide to subordinates. The four combinations are sequenced in a path that takes the subordinate from being a complete novice to being someone to whom assignments can be safely delegated i.e. someone trusted to accept and discharge responsibility for producing results – in short, an executive. The four stages are as follows:

1. **Directing.** At this first stage, the new subordinate is given a specific, clearly defined task to complete, and is then left to get on with it on their own. If you learn tennis, as an analogy, the instructor may show you how to hold a racket and bounce a ball, and then leave you to practice until you have some semblance of coordination. In a business setting, a junior may be given straightforward tasks to do – researching, checking information, getting quotes from a range of suppliers, coordinating meetings etc.
2. **Coaching.** Now the person has acquired some skills, they are given interactive support in integrating and applying it to increasingly challenging concrete situations. To continue the tennis analogy, an instructor may hit balls across the net, deliberately working your forehand or backhand, helping you to integrate individual skills into a whole package. In our business example, perhaps the junior drafts a report for a client, and is then coached intensively by their supervisor on structure, style, argument etc.
3. **Supporting.** At this stage, the leader takes a keen interest in performance, and offers encouragement, but is much slower to intervene with instructions. Your tennis instructor might play a game against you, or watch and encourage while you play another student. At this point, an increasingly confident professional might be left to produce a final draft

which will then receive approval, or fairly cursory corrective feedback. The supervisor may make themselves available for input if required, but doesn't constantly monitor every detail.

4. **Delegating.** The leader gives responsibility for producing results to the subordinate, who accepts that responsibility within some agreed boundaries – budgetary, contractual, policy, regulatory etc. See my article on *Eight Steps to Effective Delegation* for a practical framework. To continue the tennis analogy, the player in a competition is on their own. Their coach and sponsors observe from the sidelines but do not, indeed cannot, influence the play in real time. In a business situation, the leader may delegate responsibility for delivering a client project, or managing a product line, an office or client relationship, thus freeing them to develop the business strategically.

When I coach people on their delegation skills, the first issue that usually comes up is not the person's unwillingness to let go of control *per se*, but their fear that if they do let go of control, their people are not prepared to take accountability for results. Thinking in terms of situational leadership provides an explicit map to plan the development of the required qualities in your people.

In my work with leaders, I will often ask them to identify which quadrants their relationships with subordinates fall into, and we will then plan how they can accelerate the progress of their people through the process.

The transitions most emerging leaders find hard are the ones from Coaching to Supporting and especially to Delegating. What follows is a list of suggestions I and my clients have found helpful.

Seven Keys to Developing Subordinates to take Accountability

1. **Set *developmental* objectives and choose/change your style as required.** Before any suitable interaction, don't just think about the immediate business task you want performed. Take a moment to identify the developmental stage of the subordinate you are working with. Do you tend to direct them, making a rod for your own back, when actually they are more than ready to take on the whole job? Do they need so much coaching, or could they be left to their own devices more? Which of the following ideas might help to move them on to the next stage?
2. **Consider the trade-offs between Telling and Asking.** Sir John Whitmore makes a great observation about the power of Asking over Telling in performance coaching. A standard instruction to players of all ball sports is to "keep your eye on the ball". Sometimes it works, but often only temporarily – you have to keep reminding them. You will get much better results if, as a tennis coach for example, you ask questions such as "which way is the ball spinning as it comes over the net?" In order to answer the question, the coachee has to get much more *involved* in the performance, they discover more for themselves, and it tends to stick.

3. **Question their premises rather than showing them their errors.** If you are experienced, you may already know how the task should be done. But if you simply tell someone all the angles, you rob them of vital learning experiences, and their knowledge remains superficial, limiting their ability to act in new situations. Rather than saying in response to their suggestion: “That doesn’t work because of X, Y and Z”, compare the effects of this simple switch: ask “What are the likely side-effects of that course of action?” or “How can you minimise any down-side?”
4. **Consider the trade-offs between *suggesting alternatives* and *offering perspectives*.** The idea is to let them discover the answer for themselves. Sometimes it is much more powerful to say: “Your situation reminds me of a time when ... – does that help you in thinking about this issue?” and letting them do the work.
5. **Encourage long-range thinking.** Leaders have to think long-range. Often subordinates are thinking over the very short run – their preoccupation is the immediate problem. Create a wider context, and a consideration of fundamental priorities and values, by asking about long term effects and consequences of decisions. For example, when coaching people who have ‘rotated into’ departmental management roles, I am concerned to ensure some consideration of life once they rotate *out* again – I don’t want their ultimate career trajectory hurt because they were too distracted with short-term demands of internal politics and routine administration for three years.
6. **Keep an eye on life-balance.** There are many ways to apportion the life balance pie, and individuals vary tremendously: one person’s balance might feel like a 45 degree list to starboard for someone else. I am not suggesting that a leader should be intrusive, but especially when you have a mentoring-type relationship, it can be highly valuable to make suggestions to protect people from burnout – especially ambitious, driven, conscientious individuals.
7. **Create or suggest challenges.** Sometimes the most powerful thing a leader or mentor can say to someone is: “Yes, you should have a go at that”.

Leaders create leaders

There’s no doubting the power of charisma, and leaders who have it certainly have an asset (if they can figure out what to do with it).

But there is a more fundamental aspect of leadership. With or without charisma, leaders at all levels in organisations need to constantly learn and improve their ability to *get results through other people*.

Furthermore, they need to then help their subordinates do the same thing. This is not a process of bossing people about, either through direct orders or using carrots and sticks. It is

fundamentally an educational process – a process of drawing out the potential of people by helping them learn to deliver results.

Further Resources

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