What Leaders Really Do

An HBR Professor Abraham Zaleznik published an HBR article named as “Managers and Leaders: are they different?”. It was an uproar to say that major studies were missing time-and-motion studies, half life picture. The study of the leadership has not been the same piece. They don’t make plans; they don’t solve problems; they don’t even organize people. What leaders really do is prepare organizations for change and help them cope as they struggle through it. Harvard Business School professor John Kotter proposes that management and leadership are different but complementary, and that in a changing world, one cannot function without the other.

Management is about coping with complexity. Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change. Indeed, with careful selection, nurturing, and encouragement, dozens of people can play important leadership roles in a business organization. Of course, not everyone can be good at both leading and managing. Some people have the capacity to become excellent managers but not strong leaders. Others have great leadership potential but, for a variety of reasons, have great difficulty becoming strong managers. Smart companies’ value both kinds of people and work hard to make them a part of the team. Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change. Part of the reason it has become so important in recent years is that the business world has become more competitive and more volatile. Faster technological change, greater international competition, the deregulation of markets, overcapacity in capital-intensive industries, an unstable oil cartel, raiders with junk bonds, and the changing demographics of the workforce are among the many factors that have contributed to this shift. The net result is that doing what was done yesterday, or doing it 5% better, is no longer a formula for success. Major changes are more and more necessary to survive and compete effectively in this new environment. More change always demands more leadership. These two different functions – coping with complexity and coping with change–shape the characteristic activities of management and leadership. Each system of action involves deciding what needs to be done, creating networks of people and relationships that can accomplish an agenda, and then trying to ensure that those people actually do the job. But each accomplishes these three tasks in different ways. Management develops the capacity to achieve its plan by organizing and staffing–creating an organizational structure and set of jobs for accomplishing plan requirements, staffing the jobs with qualified individuals, communicating the plan to those people, delegating responsibility for carrying out the plan, and devising systems to monitor implementation. The equivalent leadership activity, however, is aligning people. This means communicating the new direction to those who can create coalitions that understand the vision and are committed to its achievement.

The idea of getting people moving in the same direction appears to be an organizational problem. But what executives need to do is not organize people but align them. A central feature of modern organizations is interdependence, where no one has complete autonomy, where most employees are tied to many others by their work, technology, management systems, and hierarchy. These linkages present a special challenge when organizations attempt to change. Unless many individuals line up and move together in the same direction, people will tend to fall all over one another. To executives who are overeducated in management and undereducated in leadership, the idea of getting people moving in the same direction appears to be an organizational problem. What executives need to do, however, is not organize people but align them.