

Leadership as a Task, Rather than an Identity

Excerpts from a Harvard Business Review article *Leaderships Online Labs* - May 2008 by Byron Reeves, Thomas W. Malone, and Tony O'Driscoll

"The organizational and strategic challenges facing players who serve as [online] game leaders are familiar ones: recruiting, assessing, motivating, rewarding, and retaining talented and culturally diverse team members; identifying and capitalizing on the organization's competitive advantage; analyzing multiple streams of constantly changing and often incomplete data in order to make quick decisions that have wide-ranging and sometimes long-lasting effects. But these management challenges are heightened in online games because an organization must be built and sustained with a volunteer workforce in a fluid and digitally mediated environment."

"Put simply, online games can be informal but realistic simulators for contemporary leadership training... Perhaps the most striking aspect of leadership in online games is the way in which leaders naturally switch roles, directing others one minute and taking orders the next. Put another way, leadership in games is a task, not an identity—a state that a player enters and exits rather than a personal trait that emerges and thereafter defines the individual."

"Don't get us wrong: Leadership stars do exist in games. Some guild leaders have successfully led 100-strong teams for a year or more—an eternity in this new medium. As in business, players with exceptional relationship skills are particularly good at forming effective teams, delegating responsibility, and keeping groups motivated and moving forward. However, games do not foster the expectation that leadership roles last forever. Someone leading a guild today may grow weary of the stress and hand over the reins after a month or two. The leader of a raid knows that someone else's skills and experience may be better suited to commanding the next effort. Even during the frenzied activity of a raid, the leadership role can be transferred as conditions change or because the person in charge doesn't happen to be around when the need for a decision arises. Notably, choices about who will lead and who will follow are often made organically by the group—frequently because someone volunteers to take over—not by some higher authority."

"Nevertheless, our findings reinforced our basic premise that leadership in online games offers a sneak preview of tomorrow's business world. In broad terms, that environment can be expected to feature the fluid workforces, the self-organized and collaborative work activities, and the decentralized, nonhierarchical leadership that typify games. In more specific terms, we found several distinctive characteristics of leadership in online games that suggest some of the qualities tomorrow's business leaders will need in order to achieve success."

"Most writing about leader selection and development focuses on people's backgrounds and natural talents. Whether leadership ability is inborn or acquired through training, the assumption is that expertise resides within the individual. Our study provided us with an arrestingly different view: Perhaps the right environment is what really matters, whoever the leader happens to be. This concept, which as far as we know is absent from the academic and professional literature about leadership, wasn't something that we set out to prove. The notion arose from the experienced gamers on our research team, who were puzzled by our initial preoccupation with the individual qualities of game leaders. "If you want better leadership," they asked, "why not change the game instead of trying to change the leaders?"

So we began to focus on identifying distinctive aspects of online game environments that could improve leadership in business and other real-world settings. We pinpointed at least two properties of games that we believe facilitate and enhance leadership: nonmonetary incentives rooted in a virtual game economy; and hyper-transparency of a wide range of information, including data about individual players' capabilities and performance. These two elements—along with the rich mix of text, audio, and visual communication in games—make it easier for leaders to be effective. Players know exactly what they should be doing and, to a large degree, have the tools they need to manage themselves. This suggests that organizations can benefit by selectively "gamifying" their work environments in order to improve the quality of leadership—not in the future but right away."