

Effective leadership

A man of humanity, wishing to establish himself, also establishes others, and wishing to enlarge himself, also enlarges others. — Confucius

The study of leadership is as old as human society. And since then, we have had a continuous chain of ‘experts,’ each with a distinct theory of exactly what leadership is; some even claim to have The Theory. Some people spend huge amounts of money to learn The Secret of ‘effective and simple’ leadership. There doesn’t seem to be such a secret. However, there is much accumulated wisdom about leadership, some quite old, that I encourage you to explore.

Remember that leadership is about *influencing* members of a group to strive for a goal. The effectiveness of a leader, then, is indicated — but only indicated, not completely defined — by a group’s progress towards its goal. An additional critical indicator of the quality of leadership is the state of the group. What is morale like? Failure to achieve a goal may be due to external factors. Only one team can win the competition, but that doesn’t mean other teams have ineffective leadership (captains/coaches). They may have, but maybe the winning team simply had more skillful players. Overwhelming strength of the enemy will cause a battle to be lost, but an effective general still holds his army together and prevents panic. A leader is not there to take the blame for team failures. Noting how football coaches are sacked, you would think otherwise. Simply put, a team with an otherwise excellent leader may not achieve a goal because of (i) external events and/or (ii) the ‘opposition’ being better.

Properties of an effective leader

There is much discussion about what makes a leader, much discussion and even some agreement.

Perhaps most importantly, effective leaders need to be *trusted by those who need to follow* them. People will not follow someone who is not trusted; they may obey, if there is enough coercive force exerted, but obedience doesn’t produce commitment to a group’s success and nor does it produce excellence. Furthermore, most people are reluctant to trust those who do not trust them in return so, to be effective, the leader needs to *trust the followers* and be recognised as trusting followers. (This is called delegation.) Leaders do not need the trust of those outside the group. That might or might not be helpful for the group’s success.

There is general consensus that leaders need to know or learn some things.

- (i) It may seem obvious, but it is worth noting that they need to *understand the actual goal*. You may have personal experience of an authority-figure who is confused about what is really going on and why.
- (ii) Equally obvious is that they need to be able to *communicate well*. Not surprising. It is hard to interact with people if you can’t communicate. You certainly won’t influence

anyone who can't understand you.

(iii) They need *some knowledge relevant to the task* of the team/group. Only some; they do not need to be the expert, the best player, There usually are experts amongst the followers. They need only enough knowledge not to be fooled by fraudsters and to recognise good advice when it is given. Of course, the more relevant expertise a leader has, the better can be the leader's direct contribution to the group. The evidence suggests that, in most contexts, wider expertise and perspective is more valuable than deeper but narrower ones for effective leadership.

The general consensus is that there is nothing particularly special about the personality of an effective leader, except that *self-confident* people (Myers-Briggs extroversion?) are more likely to be effective leaders. This may be because they are more likely to **want** to be leaders. Reluctant leaders are unlikely to be effective.

While empathy is always useful for a leader and makes influencing easier, it is not essential to effectiveness.

To engage in leadership is to do whatever it takes to encourage, guide, mentor, or set direction so that a goal is reached and change is achieved. Leadership is difficult but critical to success, especially when progress seems slow. Optimistic (hopeful) people are more encouraging.

A leader does not necessarily organise all the details of what must be done. That is the work of a different type of function: management, not leadership.

Management

Leadership is about influencing people to work towards a goal. It is dynamic, associated with change, with 'progress.' In contrast, management is not about change, but about the *stability* of a group, about the current situation. The manager's effort overcomes the natural entropy of the situation which would otherwise ensure that the pursuit of any non-trivial goal degenerated into chaos. These two conceptually distinct tasks — leadership & management — may seem contradictory! At times they are. (Remember statics & dynamics in mechanics?) Management is about process, about ensuring things are predictable and consistent, and that a group avoids chaos. The more complex a situation, the more critical is the need for good management. You could say that management is about implementing systems that are supposed to be proof against people not being perfect; leadership is about encouraging people to be good anyway.

Management ensures a team arrives at a venue on time, all wearing the team's uniform. Leadership ensures that all members play well. A good general inspires his army to fight bravely; a good quartermaster ensures the troops are fed and have ammunition. Both are needed.

Table 1: Comparing leadership & management

leadership	management
vision	process
influence	control
progress	stability
excellence	predictability

Remember that project management involves planning, monitoring and control of resources. Leadership is about setting the goals and motivation for all to do their best, not simply their contractual minimum (which is all management can enforce). You may recognise an analogy here between the ideals of ethics, which are broad aspirations for ‘perfect’ behaviour, and the rules of conduct, which are specific rules associated with minimal standards and punishments.

Leadership is not about a title. Neither is management. The person showing leadership may have any or no official title; similarly, the person with a very impressive title may display no leadership at all.

Think about a boss you’ve had. Did she/he spend too much time micro-managing exactly what you did? In many work-places, you will find senior people spend too much time checking, monitoring, redefining, and allocating resources, and not enough time leading. This is not surprising. Stability is easier to measure. Simple: did the group exceed its budget? meet its deadline? Stabilisation activities, thus, tend to be what is rewarded in the workplace, thereby encouraging the ambitious to engage in more management at the expense of leadership, even when the latter is needed.

Some argue that a Boss really has only one task as ‘leader:’ to ensure that the right person is allocated to the right job and allowed to get on with it, for then excellent performance will follow.