



Contemplation on leadership

Some projects are guided, others are not. When there is a leader we may notice that there is quite a difference in leadership. We can even say there is a lot of difference between leaders. Even speaking of different styles of leadership is putting it mildly, not only do we notice a difference in the approach of fulfilling a task, but also that different leaders take on different tasks. That is why we ask here some questions, and try to formulate some answers.

Why do people want a leader?

To realize a project with a leader, has of course a lot of practical benefits.

The leader can make sure that no important task will be overlooked, and can take care that everybody at all times has a task. He can make sure that most of the resources are put in for the tasks that need most time. He can make sure that everybody got a task that is most appropriate to his possibilities. In short, he can take care of the coordination.

The leader can make sure that the whole team goes in one direction, so that individual members do not have to worry about a direction, and do not have to keep an eye on the others, to see if they keep more or less to the same direction.

The leader can stimulate the dialogue between the team-members. He can make sure that people listen to each other, even if they wouldn't do that easily otherwise.

In general, the leader can take care of all the tasks that come under management, or make sure that these are taken care of: planning, distribution of responsibilities, controlling and solving problems, making sure that people work together, taking care of a good bond with the environment, making sure that contractual commitments are taken care of, etc.

There is altogether another aspect that influences the choice to work under leadership: the psychological aspect. Where people love to have a lot of power, there are a lot less people eager to take on a lot of responsibilities. The well-known Milgram experiment proved this in a rather surprising way. Milgram noticed, to his surprise, that almost everybody was willing to administrate deadly electrical shocks to people, when there was a leader saying: go on, I'll take the responsibility! This experiment was repeated hundreds of time, with every time the same results. The research showed as well that it was no sadism on the part of these people, but only the refusal of responsibility. On the internet-encyclopedia Wikipedia one can find a reasonable good description of this experiment. Subordinates expect from their leader that he acts as a good protecting father or mother, and do not feel safe without a leader. This looking for security from a strong leader is even strengthened by the seeking of security in a group, the wish to be "included". In extreme cases we notice how these psychological tendencies – for instance in the USA where 9/11 created such a fear – make people look for simplistic ready answers from their leaders, sacrifice eagerly all their critical qualities, just to not have to bear responsibility, and make them accept that ersatz enemies are being attacked, just to be able to stay in the illusion that nothing like this will ever happen again. The illusion that big strong daddy will protect them from all evil. Looking for protection is one strong tendency we all carry in us, in some people more than in others. There are other powers in us as well, there wouldn't be any leaders otherwise, and no people preferring to work independently or self-employed. More about that in a next item.



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For the moment we notice here already the benefits of the directive or even authoritarian leader: besides the practical benefits of coordination and management, he is giving security to these looking for a sense of safety, the need thereof springing from childhood and this need can be very strong for some. Frightening or unsure situations will make the success of the directive leaders.

Why do people refuse a leader?

It is an ideal that rises up again and again: the team wherein creativity, respect, self-realization, freedom, responsibility, friendship, are values that are held high, and where no leader is needed. The team that guides itself. The team wherein only a healthy competition lives and no relation-destroying passion for power.

2.1 What are the factual benefits of a team like that? It is a paradox that many of the fundamental benefits of a team without a leader are by-products of its disadvantages. The preceding chapter showed the advantages of working with a leader: taking care of the coordination, taking care of safety, direction, and taking care of a great deal of the responsibility. In a directive, well-guided team, nobody has to worry too much about the work of another team-member, about the feelings of another, or about the rightness of one's own work: the management and the structure take care of all that. One can be working perfectly egoistical and irresponsible, and still, in the whole, everything works. In a group without a leader this is impossible. Or nothing gets ever done, or one has to count on everybody. Human relationships are far more important. If there is a leader, some meetings are only necessary to show the directives. Sometimes real consultative meetings are needed, since reality proves that people participate more actively when they participate in the decision-making. But even if some people are against the decisions, they can be forced to participate. Without a leader deliberation is needed until everybody agrees to participate. This can take a long time, especially when the group is relatively new. But thereafter there exists a dynamic one finds rarely in guided teams. During the work itself, the partners have to consider each other, also each others feelings. Otherwise everything will go constantly wrong. The cohesion of the team is very strongly strengthened. The forces of the group-dynamics working in a team like this make sure that everyone is strongly confronted with his own being, his own responsibilities. Whoever cannot take this leaves the team, or evolves, or breaks down. People, who do not consider the others, get a lot of pressure from the team to change that attitude. People, who don't take care of themselves, also suffer. In teams where the tasks can be done independently, where people function independently, there are no significant problems. In teams where a lot of consultation and adjustment is needed, the task is not so simple. When it works, it proves an enriching experience for everybody, to compare with an interesting partner-relationship. And what is more, the members of the team are motivating each other, so that everybody gives the best of himself with pleasure.

2.2 Teams wherein the members change frequently, and stay on building on one whole, are quite often able to realize very complex structures, structures that would have been impossible to be realized by one person. The construction of our culture is such a complex structure, realized by a group without a leader. Our legislation is another example. This last one is a very good example: all the ethical laws and principles that were presented by philosophers in the course of history were simplistic and didn't take in account the day to day realities. Only the democratic power-play made sure that a legislation – although complex – was made wherein as much as possible everybody is included. That this construction is not completed is not due to the lack of leadership, or to bad leadership, but due to the fact that many parties still have no say, that we have no real democracy yet, especially when seen on a world-scale.

In nature there is an endless series of examples of structures, made out of many different elements, which organize themselves. Some (f.i. Kaufmann, 1995) think that this (i.e. the self-organizing quality of nature) is the most important force of evolution, rather than the "survival of the fittest".

It is very tempting to think that this also gives the best results in groups.



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How can the benefits of working without a leader be kept by a certain way of leadership?

Both preceding chapters showed the advantages and disadvantages of working with or without a leader.

The question can arise in how far a team-leader can guide his team in such a way that the benefits of a team without a leader can be kept. Or maybe even strengthened?

A team with a leader who works only to further the process (and is not directive) answers this for the greatest part. What does it mean, stimulating the process? It means that the leader especially takes care of the communication in the group, makes sure that everyone is motivated, that the conditions for working are optimal, and that the contacts with the outside world are going smoothly. Solving problems is not his main task, he tries to make sure that this is done by the team.

Let us look at how the advantages and disadvantages of the two preceding items are working in a group with such a leader.

Concerning the practical benefits cited in chapter 1, these are, with the exception of item 3 ("The leader stimulates the dialogue between the team-members") a lot less present with the process-coach. The leader who just stimulates the process can pay attention to the tasks of management, but it is not his priority. As process-coach he will take care that these tasks are done. The advantage of the leader keeping an eye on these tasks is kept in every way, and he has to keep an eye on the one doing the management, so he doesn't get all the power, otherwise a pseudo-manager would rise up, concerning himself only with the structure.

Giving security to people is on the one hand very explicit, the team-members can get a strong feeling that the leader cares about them and sees them and values them as human beings. On the other side, team-members who want to avoid their own responsibilities and rather avoid making choices are quite often heavily disappointed. The process-coaching leader, who does not point at the direction himself, confronts very strongly his co-workers with his attitude. Also, in conflicts between the team-members, the process-coaching leader will not cut the knot himself, but will demand a dialogue between his co-workers, and demand that they learn to get on with each other by themselves. We notice here some of the same phenomena as seen in a group without a leader. But here the process-coaching leader can act as moderator in the talk between the parties. In frightening situations group-members will not choose for such a leader. Actually, they will choose rather for pseudo-safety than for a realistic fear.

Realizing very complex, creative structures as made in groups without a leader, is also possible in teams with a process-stimulating structure. After all, the leader provides neither the direction nor the solution. These are provided through consultation by the group-members, as in a group without a leader. But since now there is a leader present, he can point out to his team-members when they are working too much in different directions. So less time will be lost in needless work. It is also less likely that the goal will be overlooked as is the case in groups without a leader.

Process-stimulating leadership is very much like coaching. The training of a sports-team is a nice example of the importance of stimulating the process. A football-team from Greece becomes then Olympic Champion, without a doubt less due to the present individual talent than to the cohesion of the team. And this again is an achievement of the trainer. A trainer can be very directive as well, and plan the game to the very last detail. But then you get a team from which all creativity is taken, that plays rather defensive and stereotypical.

Coaching a team with a lot of ball-conjurers, like Brazil, asks for a very good process-coach. See f.i. P. Winsemius (2005) about the famous football-player (and trainer) Johann Cruyff and leadership.

4. Concluding considerations and other theme's concerning leadership.

All this shows a lot of possibilities to work with the given of leadership.

Everybody's own personal history determinates for a part, and in what manner, how they prefer a certain way of leadership. It is a pity that it is also a psychological given that



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people, who take being led very difficultly, also have problems with taking up responsibilities (even for themselves) and have trouble to work independently or take up leadership themselves. These people function at best in the environment that they protest against the hardest: under an authoritarian leader. Then they are angry with the leader, but less frightened.

This last consideration proves something of the complexity of the problem of leadership. Even considering this complexity it is possible to point out some general rules, as was showed in the preceding pages:

1. Different situations demand different styles of leadership. Often one speaks about situational leadership. See f.i. P. Hersey (2001)
2. Even if it is not always known, management is not the same as leadership, and management alone is not enough.

Management puts the accent on planning, on creating stability and routine, allocating responsibility, controlling and solving problems, taking care of compliancy, emphasizing the contractual commitments, keeping the power, distance and rationality of the manager, approaching the environment creatively. But leadership emphasize more vision and mission, creating change and renovation, motivation and inspiration, creating involvement, stimulating extra effort, interest in others and intuition thereof of the leader, empowerment of the others, a pro-active attitude and creating possibilities and conditions. See f.i. Muijen (2003) for a rather thorough exposé of these differences.

The strange thing is that no-one would consider only managing a football-team, or playing without a trainer, while big companies do live in the illusion that they only need managers. Of course, also parenthood is an important case of leadership: would it feel good if your parents only managed you?

3. To give leading on a top-scale (general manager f.i.) is totally different than leading on a middle-manager scale, and still different from leading a project. On these three scales the most adequate style of leadership will be mostly different.

Actually, as yet nothing is said about the most essential question: "What is actually essential to leadership, when is someone adopting the attitude of a leader, and when as a subordinate?" Or more concrete: "How can you notice if someone is acting as a leader?"

Related questions are: "Do you need power to act from the position as a leader? What is power actually, and what kinds of power are there?" and: "Does one need something like 'inner strength' to be a leader, and why does one need it?" The text "The rose of Axes, applied to leadership" gives, based on a model, answers to these questions.

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