

# Down from the Mountaintop, or Demythologizing “Leadership”

Robert C. Burgee

Every manager would like leadership to emanate from the work group. Without the creativity, initiative, and risk taking implicit in leadership coming from members of the team, the manager is forced to make decisions as if all ideas for work improvement and problem-solving reside at the top of the hierarchy. Of course, we know better. Personnel at any level, and with varying amounts of experience, can contribute significant leadership in the development and execution of plans. However, in defining leadership we consistently confuse leadership behavior with the position of the nominal leader (e.g., the manager, chief, boss, etc.). This relegates subordinates to positions of support, “followership,” and other roles lacking important influence over the destiny of the team.

Any reader of the literature today will notice that discussions of leadership focus with predictable regularity on the personalities of key political figures, chiefs of large businesses, or high-ranking military commanders. The effect of this concentration of interest suggests that leadership is a function of position and that the middle manager, technician, or staff specialist either must eschew the taking of leadership positions on issues they confront or must operate in an arena strictly limited by their title and authority. By focusing the discussion of leadership on individuals who hold top-level positions, at least two distinct perils arise: (1) The view that leadership is defined by position. This leads, in turn, to the assumptions that if I am not in a leadership position, I cannot assert leadership traits or those who are in leadership positions must be leaders or they wouldn’t be where they are. (2) The view that leadership is comprised of a special, unique collection of traits is enduring in the individual (once you have it, you never lose it) and is heroic in nature—that is, the leader masters great difficulties, solves problems of great moment, and does it all with a just and compassionate hand.

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In our work with organizations in both the private and public sectors, we consistently find that discussions of leadership quickly become discussions of the person who is hierarchically on top of the organization or team. Leadership is vested exclusively in the “leader” (i.e., the boss). Supervisors and managers, when asked in a group, “How many of you see yourselves as leaders?” will respond with few raised hands and with furtive looks around the room. It connotes bragging to call yourself a leader, especially among your peers, which again suggests that leadership comprises a unique set of traits, and to claim these traits for yourself would be arrogant. It also ties leadership to the accrual of the power and control that accompanies top-level positions. If we are to promote the exercise of leadership among *all* the players on the team it is essential to separate the process of leadership from the title of leader.

There are many ways leadership is expressed apart from the world of institutional power and visibility. Examples of quiet, unspectacular leadership exist off the job when “average” employees carry significant leadership responsibilities in their local community’s civic, school, religious, or charitable organizations. Many examples exist on the job in middle- and low-echelon positions. So it is important to expand the “lens” through which we view leadership behaviors, for if we don’t move away from narrowly focused, heroic models of leadership, we risk confining our discussions of the subject to such esoterics as “vision,” “inspiration,” and “charisma,” and limiting its exercise to those who hold positions of power and control.

## Leadership Perspective

One common view of leadership is that the leader (manager) figuratively stands apart from individuals, groups, tasks, and situations. When a problem is perceived or when help is requested, the leader steps in and takes the appropriate action to resolve the issue and then moves on to other leadership duties. Richard Pascale and Anthony Athos in their book, *The Art of Japanese Management*, describe the archetypal example of this view of leadership when they discuss Harold Geneen’s tenure at ITT.

At ITT Geneen was the arbiter of what would work and what wouldn’t, who was right and who was wrong, and channeled virtually all information and decisions through his office. This form of managing is highly centralized and

leader-dependent. It is also the most common perception managers have of themselves as leaders and of those who are above them in the hierarchy. The confusion of “leader,” as a position (e.g., chief of staff, president, chairman, manager) with “leadership” as a process or function is common and creates the problems that are apparent when we separate the person or the leader from the situation with which he or she is confronted.

A different and realistic perspective on leadership makes the leader *part of* the situation. The assumption operating here is that persons exercising leadership behaviors do not step into problem-solving situations with “clean hands.” They are, by their prior actions and their style, part of the problem (or situation). In some circumstances, they may be *the* problem. This is not to suggest that individuals should be concerned at every turn with their approval rating by others or should strive for consensus on every issue to avoid unpopularity. It does suggest that leaders who are not aware of their own style, of the impact they have on others, and of what they contribute to ineffectiveness and confusion in the workplace, lack a powerful tool for personal growth and surely frustrate their peers and subordinates.

### Personal Style as a Leadership Tool

One important rationale for exploring the personal style of managers is to help them determine what effect their style has on the situations in which they find themselves. For example, suppose a crime has been committed, and a detective (leader) is called in to find the criminal. This assumes that the detective comes in from the outside, innocent of any complicity in the event. However, the leader (manager) does not take on problems within his or her responsibility free of “complicity,” but participates in, and is part of the problem. This poses the question, what if the detective is the criminal?

What if, because of personal style, managers unwittingly “train” others to perform in ways that produce poor results? Without awareness of their style and the effects they have on others, managers are, in effect, “flying blind.” If they solicit and receive feedback from others, they can reduce the blind spots: In effect they can create an instrument panel to help them read the effects of their style on others. From this information the leaders can decide what changes in behavior they want to initiate.

Not only are managers often part of the problem, it is very difficult for them to know what part of the problem they constitute. We are all self-referencing. That is, we all use our own values, attitudes, and perceptions as guides for our behavior and give to situations the response we believe—in our own self-referencing logic—is appropriate. It is no accident that managers often assemble around them people of similar bent. This makes it very difficult for the manager to get candid feedback, since anyone who would give it is part of the same dynamic.

Another important rationale for examining style is to assist the team, and especially the manager, to utilize *all* the

resources on the team. Different styles bring different points of view and talents to the problem-solving process; and without a ground of acceptance and support, the energy and resourcefulness of these differences become quiet or misdirected. This requires a posture by the manager that encourages diversity. Managers must be partners with their team members, and true partnership can come about only with the genuine communication of trust in others’ motives and a respect for others’ intelligence and commitment. This communication is impossible if managers buy into the idea that, as titular leaders, they are also the front of leadership in their groups.

Since 1973 we have been researching the dynamics of teamwork and leadership through the use of a personal style model designed to describe personal style and to illuminate the strengths and limitations of certain given style tendencies in problem-solving and decision-making situations. The model, called Stylemetrics, uses a descriptive checklist of terms, which, when completed by the participant and by his or her “audience” (five persons selected to complete the same checklist), provides comparative profiles of personal style. A critical part of the process is the *descriptive* nature of the resulting profiles. There are no preferred styles and no styles better than others. There are, however, strengths and limitations to any style position.

If we hold the assumption that leadership is the province of the person in power (the manager) or is comprised of a special, unique collection of traits, then the *style* of the manager becomes the model for leadership. Models are fine.

We all need models for behavior and for developing attitudes and ethical positions. But models can become “the way things are done” and can create imitative behavior. We see this happen when work teams take on the dress, haircut, and mannerisms of the boss. This modeling becomes more pernicious when it takes the form of significant personal style shifts.

The profiling of a manager and his or her work team gives all participants a base from which to analyze their relationships with others on the team, including the manager, and to adopt productive strategies for increasing personal effectiveness in negotiating with others on the team.

In the hands of managers the profile becomes a potent coaching and career development instrument, allowing them to place themselves in the dynamic of the team without taking undue responsibility for failures and also without avoiding responsibility for those failures in which they play a major role. If, as argued earlier, the manager is *part of* the problem, the profile process gives him or her a tool for determining what part to play and what to do to ameliorate his or her negative contributions.

The objective examination of style also serves to dampen the effects of bias, a condition that is natural to all of us and which is especially harmful when present in the manager. Since we all tend to be self-referencing in our judgments of others, it follows that we tend to view those who are like us in a more favorable light than those who are different. Such tendencies are a major cause of prejudice and carry over in

the workplace in how we interpret the behavior of others in comparison with how we would behave in the situation. If the manager can come to understand that there is no one best style that denotes leadership and that leadership is not the province of the visionary or the charismatic, then movement toward true partnership and teamwork can be realized. This understanding by the manager that leadership is truly egalitarian accomplishes two important ends: It frees the follower from the notion that leadership is reserved for those with leader titles; and, equally critical, it frees managers from the notion that they must be smarter, quicker, better informed, and more decisive than anyone on their team. They realize that they do not have to sit at the head of the table and carve the roast at every meal.

The very term *leadership* implies a collaboration of some sort. One does not lead unless at least one other person is there to respond to the leader's initiative. In modern organi-

zations this collaboration takes place in a complex web of interrelated work teams, with participation and accountability dispersed widely across formal organizational boundaries. How do we speak to the "typical" manager, secretary, or technician if the only models for leadership are the heroic, and sometimes self-aggrandizing figures who stand atop the hierarchical pyramid? We need more commonplace examples of leadership to inspire and encourage leadership behavior from among those who toil in the trenches. We need to examine and illustrate the behaviors of leadership as partnership, teamwork, mentoring, support, and shared responsibility if we are to tap the enormous potential of initiative, creativity, and energy from among the middle and lower echelons of organizations. We need to demythologize leadership behavior and to bring it back to the level where it can be understood and exercised by any of us.