

SEMINAR I:
The Power of Leadership
By
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Introduction

Leadership is a mysterious and complex topic but that doesn't stop it from being of intense interest to many. In order to expand its executive education program several years ago, the University of Arkansas asked me to come up with several leadership seminars. The first and most obvious choice was a seminar that introduced a way of thinking about basic concepts of leadership. Since its development, I have given this seminar to dozens of audiences ranging from a roomful of CEOs to a roomful of plumbers.

What are reasonable expectations for a seminar on leadership? The first expectation is *focus*- leadership is such a complex and multi-dimensional concept that it is easy to get overwhelmed by different perspectives. In the weeks before giving a recent leadership seminar, I paid attention to articles on leadership that appeared in social media. According to the articles, successful leaders were storytellers, successful leaders had the skills of standup comedians and alternatively, the key to successful leadership was either emotional intelligence or golf. Clearly, it helps to have a focus on basic, comprehensive principles of leadership. A second expectation is *applicability*. A seminar on leadership can easily become theoretical in nature but that is not helpful to people on a leader development journey. Most people want to know what leadership concepts look like in real-life. So, to my mind, an effective leadership seminar provides a focused discussion of leadership and clearly links these concepts to reality.

Check your leadership assumptions!

We begin with a vignette from American military history that serves two purposes. First, it makes my point that the world of leadership (just like the world of strategy) includes, at least, two dimensions- the military world of leadership and the corporate world of leadership. Most people keep these two worlds distinct but there is no reason to do so- any student of leadership will benefit from a study of both. The second reason for the vignette is that it immediately points out to the seminar attendees that they possess several powerful assumptions about leadership.

It was 27 June 1862 and Lee's Confederate army was about to engage in battle with McClellan's Union army for the first time. As the Confederates prepared for their assault, one commander said to his men, "We are going to take that line. I am going to lead you!" Another was heard to say as he pointed to the enemy position, "Boys, you can take it!"

I then pose a multiple choice quiz to the attendees. The question is simple- which unit do you think performed better? There are three possible answers: a) the unit of the commander who led his men, b) the unit of the commander who send his men on their way or c) you don't think that the actions of a leader affect the performance of their organization. More than ninety percent of the time, seminar attendees immediately pick the unit of the leader who said "I am going to lead you!" as the unit that performed better.

This response uncovers two very basic and very widely held assumptions of leadership. People who pick answer a or b (and *everyone* always picks a or b) are alike in that they assume leadership has the ability to exert a positive effect on organizational performance. People who pick a or b are also showing that they have personal preferences about their leaders. Some people are inspired by someone who says "Follow me" because they think that leader is showing a willingness to share risk. Others are not inspired by someone who says "Follow me" because they interpret such behavior as micromanaging. As I mentioned before, leadership is complex.

PART I: THE FUNDAMENTALS OF LEADERSHIP **(expressed in two principles)**

Leadership principle #1- Leaders and managers are very different

What is one of the most important things to know about leadership? That it is different than management. Many people don't understand the distinction and it is a useful difference to consider. The difference between managers and leaders rests on the difference between *authority* and *influence*.

Authority is something that can be given. If a company hires you to run a distribution center, you are given the authority that goes with that position. You have the authority to tell people that their job consists of specific tasks and that they will be held to specific standards. With authority, you have a degree of control over resources, information and decisions. Being an effective manager is not a question of generating authority, it is a question of using the authority you are given in an effective manner. An important side-note is: just because authority can be given does not mean that it is easy to use. Some people spend years in an MBA program learning how to use authority effectively. By using their authority effectively, managers can achieve goals and make their organizations productive. So, who needs leadership?

Managers who only know how to use authority well are like carpenters who only have screwdrivers in their toolbox. Leadership is an additional tool in a manager's toolbox and it firmly rests on the concept of *influence*. The primary difference between authority and influence is that authority can be given while influence must be earned. Leaders must

generate their own influence. Sounds like a lot of work, why bother? Because effective leadership is a key to individual success and fulfillment. It is also a key to outstanding organizational performance. Sun Tzu once said, "When a tiger guards the ford, ten thousand deer cannot cross." Organizations perform better with the galvanizing effect of great leaders. Consider the following situation- there are two teams with the same amount of resources but one team consistently outperforms the other. Researchers have found that the most common reason for this disparity is great leadership. Management and leadership are very different phenomena but the powerful insight is that they are complementary. A great manager who is also a great leader will be more effective (and their organization will be more effective) than someone who is simply a great manager. Once this distinction is made clear, the obvious question is- if generating leadership influence is an individual choice, then how is it done? This leads to our second leadership principle.

Leadership principle #2- Leadership is a social contract

Managers manage all sorts of resources. They manage money, buildings, knowledge. Leaders only lead people. Which leads to the realization that leadership is all about interpersonal relationships. Team members have certain expectations of team leaders and if these expectations are met, leaders have influence. That is why I say that leadership is a social contract. If leaders meet expectations, they have fulfilled their terms of the contract in the eyes of team members and as a result, all sorts of wonderful outcomes are likely to occur. With effective leaders, organizations have more cohesion, a greater degree of trust and above-average performance. We can generalize about people's expectations of their leaders by considering three categories.

- 1) **Competence**: Team members expect their leader to possess a certain degree of competence but the specific competency depends on the nature of the organization and its context. I know that sounds pretty theoretical so let me give you an example. The HBO miniseries "Band of Brothers" is an outstanding portrayal of an American Army unit (E Company, 2/506th Regiment, 101st Airborne) in combat during World War II. The first episode is about their training for the invasion of Europe. The soldiers went through two types of training once they joined E Company. First, they had individual training (learning marksmanship, how to jump out of an airplane, etc). During this stage of training, their commander was Captain Herbert Sobel, an interesting character. It is made clear that no one in the unit likes Sobel but all of them are influenced by him and try very hard to meet his standards. Sobel models several aspects of effective leadership and his soldiers gradually show the makings of a fine unit. This positive situation changes dramatically once the soldiers begin their unit-level training at a different Army post. As they learn collective skills out in the field, it becomes apparent that Captain Sobel is hopeless at land navigation and cannot read a map. His soldiers lose all respect for him and refuse to serve under

him in combat. Being able to read a map was seen as a basic competency that soldiers could reasonably expect of their commander. Now, notice this is a leader competency expected by a particular type of organization at a particular time in history. A leader in a 21st century retail organization (for example) would be expected to demonstrate different competencies. What leader competencies does your organization expect?

- 2) **Character**: Team members also have expectations of the character of their leader. And again, these expectations change over time and might be specific to the organization. For example- suppose I had a roomful young Army officers and posed the following question. You and your platoon are out on patrol and you have just been resupplied with a hot meal. You are not sure if there is enough food for the entire platoon. Do you (as the platoon leader) eat first or last? I guarantee that every lieutenant in the room would answer that the commander always eats last. This character-revealing behavior is an indication that commanders place the welfare of their soldiers above their own welfare and is something that is routinely expected in the U.S. Army of the 21st century. But consider. In other armies, at other times, this was not so. In other cultures, eating last is considered a sign of weakness and soldiers in those cultures would not respect leaders who demonstrated weakness. Just as we did with the discussion on leader competencies, we end with the thought-provoking question- what character traits do your organization expect of a leader?
- 3) **Behavior**: I once had a senior law enforcement official of a large government agency talk to the cadets in my management class about leadership. His unit was the go-to unit in times of crisis; handling rescue missions or hostage negotiations. The official shared with the cadets that he had two very different ways of acting as a leader. Most of the time, he was collaborative in nature, looking for lots of input and seeking consensus. In times of crisis however, he changed and became much more directive and autocratic. Moreover, he found that his unit were comfortable with this distinction. Leader behaviors can vary widely; some behaviors help strengthen the social contract of leadership and some do not. If you have ever worked for a leader who was an insecure screamer in times of crisis, you know what I mean.

Summarizing the social contract of leadership: The ingredients that leaders must put into their relationship fall into the three general categories of competence, character and behavior. If their inputs resonate with team members, all sorts of interesting results occur. Teams become more cohesive, more resilient, more trusting and more productive. And all of this all comes about because of leadership.

PART TWO: DEVELOPING LEADERS

There are two different approaches that can be combined when discussing the development of leaders. The first approach is to provide an example of a particular organization and highlight its approach to leader development. From this example, we can distill principles that all of us can use as we embark on our individual leader development journeys.

The example that I always use in this seminar is West Point. I spent twelve years of my life teaching there so I feel comfortable discussing its approach to leader development. After our seminar discussion of aspects of life at West Point, we conclude by identifying the following leadership observations.

- 1) ***Leadership is a valuable resource that can provide an organization with competitive advantage:*** West Point has been a military academy for more than two centuries and for most of that time, a primary focus has been the development of leaders. The U.S. Army and the national government are willing to devote a lot of resources to this task because successive generations of decision-makers have seen the value of this pursuit.
- 2) ***Every arrow needs a target:*** It is not possible to build a leader development program unless you first have a clear mental model of what you want leaders to look like. What competencies? What character traits? What sort of behavior? The U.S. Army has devoted a great deal of time to thinking about this topic.
- 3) ***Leaders are made, not born:*** If it were the other way around, you wouldn't need a place like West Point.
- 4) ***You can't learn to ride a bike by reading a book:*** in other words, a leader development journey does not take place solely in a classroom. Budding leaders need to practice aspects of leadership in real life and receive feedback on their efforts.

The second approach to the topic of leader development focuses on the journey itself. What can you do to ensure that your leader development journey is a productive one? One thought to remember is that life provides many different experiences and only some of them are relevant or useful to our leadership journey. There is a small subset of life experiences that have the potential for shaping us fundamentally and forever as leaders. Some leadership scholars call these "crucible" experiences. Consider two of the jobs that I had as a young officer in a field artillery battalion. First, I was a fire support officer, which meant that I served with infantry battalions out in the field as their indirect fire specialist. Later on, I was lucky enough to be selected for battery command. I was twenty-seven years old and I was responsible for the readiness, discipline and welfare of the one hundred soldiers in my field artillery battery. Which job do you think was more instrumental in my

leader development journey? The lesson here is that there are certain experiences in life that are instrumental in leader development and we should value such experiences.

One last point- having a crucible experience is a waste of time unless we use this opportunity in an intelligent manner. The first sign of intelligence is self-reflection. Do you have a disciplined and insightful way of deriving meaning from experience? I went through Army Ranger School when I was a twenty-year old college student. The experience has provided me with food for thought for decades. Reflection, however, is not an automatic process. It is the product of practice and discipline. The second intelligent approach to developing as a leader focuses on feedback. Do you have a network of mentors, coaches and peers who can provide other perspectives of your performance? Their perspective of your performance might be very different than your perspective but reflection and feedback are both vital tools for developing yourself as a leader.

I always end this leadership seminar by asking participants to write down the three most important things they learned during this session and how they are going to put these learnings into practice. I then ask them to share these insights with other team members and listen to what they have to say. Notice that I am trying to reinforce (in a small way) the two habits that are essential to leader development- engaging in self-reflection and receiving feedback.