The Essence of Leadership

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Leadership. The topic repeatedly graces the covers of business magazines and academic journals. Hundreds, if not thousands, of books are published on leadership. As managers, we try to decipher and emulate the styles of great leaders. And as trainers and consultants, we try to design experiences that will help people learn to become better leaders. But are we fully capturing the essence of leadership?

Most leadership development programs exclusively focus on the leader—their skills, abilities, competencies, behaviors, activities, or styles. If followers are brought into the process at all, it's usually to provide another perspective on the leader's personal characteristics and qualities. Such programs are built on an assumption that if leaders are taught to perform certain activities or demonstrate particular styles, their followers will automatically respond in a predictable and desirable ways, resulting in improved productivity and leader effectiveness. However, the responses of followers are rarely automatic and, instead, are based on the totally of their experiences with the leader. As a result, leadership programs that are based on this model can, at best, produce limited results.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago, the manager of a large division that had administered the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI) asked me to present the results to all of his employees. The manager had just attended some leadership seminars and workshops and was inspired to describe his vision for change at this presentation. After I presented the OCI results (which revealed a culture that was Oppositional and Avoidance), the manager got up and gracefully and articulately described his vision and general strategy for change. He then opened the presentation to the audience for questions. Someone in the audience asked how he was going to deal with the delays and lack of participation in a large project that the division was currently responsible for completing. The manager vehemently responded that he would no longer tolerate these delays and that "heads were going to roll." His response to this question took less time to prepare and deliver than the speech about his vision for moving toward a Constructive culture. Yet, I could see by the faces of those in the audience that it was his response to the question, rather than his vision for change, that impacted them. The culture of the division never did change and eventually it was shut down completely.

A leader's skills, abilities, competencies, behaviors, activities, and styles are important, but they do not define the essence of one's leadership. **Rather, the essence of leadership is the *impact* that a person has on the thinking and behavior of others and the *culture* that he or she ends up creating as a result.** Thus, managers who want to learn to be better leaders need to understand their impact as well as the personal characteristics and qualities that contribute to that impact. Information on impact provides the context—and purpose—for the choices that the manager will then make about changes in leadership activities, behaviors, or styles.

For further information see:

R. A. Cooke. (1996). *Leadership/Impact.* Arlington Heights, IL: Human Synergistics/Center for Applied Research.

J. L. Szumal. (2001). *Leadership/Impact Facilitator's Manual*. Arlington Heights, IL: Human Synergistics/Center for Applied Research.