



Leaders Have Several Options

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The word "leader" has many definitions, and the books on leadership would fill a bookshelf and more. Yet groups continue to wrestle with the question as they seek to manage their affairs in the best possible manner.

What Do Leaders Do?

The chores of group leadership are varied. Some require planning and coordinating; others go on during the course of the meeting; others are follow-up activities or are related to cooperation between groups.

It is foolhardy to believe—or expect—that a single individual, no matter how capable or dedicated, can fulfill ALL of the leadership responsibilities of a group. Yet the "tired leader syndrome" in those who try is not an uncommon phenomenon.

Continuing groups do, over time, develop some norms or leadership patterns. The president or chairperson, by job description or tradition, is expected to assume a certain role and take on certain tasks: make the physical arrangements for the meeting, preside at the meeting, represent the group on community or regional councils, propose constitutional changes, "crack the whip," be the group's chief public relations voice. Groups may also expect their president to know the most about all topics discussed, be an expert in managing both conflicts and discussion, "hand-hold" and counsel members. It is no wonder the leader's roles are many: executive, planner, policy maker, expert, controller of internal relationships,

rewarder and punisher, example, parent image, scapegoat.

Persons who ascend to the "top spot" also have notions about what a leader is and does. This concept of leadership is usually a composite of the individual's experiences as a leader and group member and consists of some specific feelings about what a good leader does and does not do. Exposure or lack of exposure to leadership training may also contribute to the picture of "the leader I want to be." The individual's self-concept, rapport with and confidence in the group, and overall view of life and people are factors, also.

It once was true that group leaders, those chosen for positions of responsibility in groups, best exemplified the norms and goals of the group. This no longer seems to be so true. When being the club president was the end sought by many of the group, leaders could reasonably be expected to identify strongly with the group's goals and modes of operating—be the group's most "typical" or "best" members. But now that there are few waiting lines of understudies eager for the challenge and responsibility of leading groups, there may be less likelihood of those wishing to emulate the leader.

What Makes Leaders "Tick"?

The chairperson or president these days may be the person who sought the opportunity to lead and was eager for it. But the president may also be the one who is most available—has the time/willingness to take on the assignment, or the person most bent on bringing about change.

Thus, today's club leader may have minimally developed leadership skills or few of the personality traits usually looked for in a leader; and he or she may have few strong views about leadership. Such persons are not likely to make major changes in the group's leadership pattern; rather, they will seek to maintain the **status quo** and follow past custom.

On the other hand, if the leader wants to "change the world," he/she may cast past leadership patterns of the organization to the winds and institute innovation and change. In this case, sweeping changes are likely.

If the previous leader was authoritative and domineering, the new leader may bend over backwards to share leadership and operate democratically. The reverse could also be true.

Most of us tend to think of a single leader, someone who holds a position of authority in a group. Our image is thus of a person who has been elected or appointed, and when we speak of good or poor leadership, the names and personalities of great presidents or tyrants usually come to mind.

What Traits Do Leaders Have?

As many as 79 traits have been identified that correlate positively with leadership expertise. Among the most frequently listed characteristics are empathy (ability to identify with and respond to the needs of members), ability to give instructions or explain, talkativeness, cheerfulness, enthusiasm, alertness and originality.

Research studies conclude that the average leader exceeds the average member of his/her group in sociability, initiative, persistence, knowledge of how to get things done, self-confidence, cooperativeness, popularity, adaptability and verbal facility. And it is generally agreed that, other things being equal, the individual who is above average in height and attractive in appearance has a better chance of being elected to positions of leadership in face-to-face situations than does the short, unattractive individual.

Most who subscribe to the last point of view hold that those who are leaders in one situation are also leaders in others.

Critics of this approach call attention to the following inadequacies:

1. Most lists give little suggestion of which traits are most important and which are least important—in other words, few lists order or rank traits.
2. Sometimes traits mentioned in a list are not mutually exclusive—for instance, both tact and judgment are ordinarily included in common sense.
3. Trait studies don't discriminate between the traits needed to gain leadership and those needed by an established leader to conduct the group's day-to-day affairs.
4. Exponents of this approach list or describe the traits but offer little help to persons seeking to develop them.
5. In life, leadership appears to be situational—the skills or attitudes needed differ from group to group.

Research suggests that productive individuals in groups, whether elected leaders or not, do possess certain skills to a higher degree than nonproductive group members. Many of these skills can be learned. Productive individuals seem to possess knowledge of group processes, knowledge of the problem under consideration, the ability to think quickly, language and speech skills, the ability to listen, the ability to be impartial, social sensitivity and respect for others.

Leadership Style

If we think of a group's having a single leader, we are apt to label his or her behavior as "authoritarian" or "democratic." Often we think in terms of extreme positions rather than the range that is represented by these descriptives. The implication often is that the so-called authoritarian leader is the "bad" leader. Not necessarily—some circumstances require a firm hand. The wise presider recognizes such a need and performs accordingly. Authoritarian characteristics are easy to identify. The authoritarian leader plans, directs and informs. He/she decides on the group's goals and motivates the group to accept and use his/her suggestions, requests or demands. He/she assumes control and generally believes his/her decisions are superior to those of the group.

It's Efficient, But . . .

In most instances, this leadership style is of questionable value because it gives the membership little opportunity to grow and develop. It remains dependent and achieves little improvement in decision making, planning and organizing. However, authoritarian leadership is efficient, does get things done quickly and **may be necessary** if extreme conflict exists.

A Morale Builder

Group-centered or democratic leadership is the other side of the coin. It is group-centered: the leader is secure, fair, egalitarian. Group-centered leadership encourages participation, provides a training ground for leadership development and encourages free communication. It draws upon the total leadership potential of the group and encourages the presentation of many ideas to choose from. Group morale tends to be high, and self-discipline frequently emerges. In such situations, there is usually strong support for decisions reached and great commitment to action projects—after all, "**WE** made the **decision!**"

Though "democratic" has many positive connotations, there are negative spinoffs. Since it is nonthreatening, it may encourage little structure and lead to unproductive use of time. Some call it inefficient.

Though it is easy to think of polar opposites on a leadership continuum, few leaders are really totally authoritarian or 100 percent democratic in their approach. And since there are a number of dimensions to leadership, it is the rare individual who exhibits the same degree of control over all aspects of leadership.

Substantive vs. Procedural

Groups need leadership in both substantive matters—what is being discussed—and in procedural matters—how the discussion is managed. A leader who is very involved substantively may be very uninvolved procedurally, or vice versa. For clarity, let's use "involved" and "uninvolved" to describe substantive leadership, and "tight" and "loose" to describe procedural leadership.

A leader may want to be an active discussant, feeling that he/she has the best information on the subject and is the group's "best thinker." In this case, no one is in doubt about what the leader thinks or where he/she stands—he/she is substantively "involved."

Other presiders feel that they must maintain an unbiased posture and not contribute to the substantive discussions of the group; such leaders play a moderator role and are substantively "uninvolved."

No doubt the ideal lies somewhere between these two positions. No group should be deprived of any expertise that is present, nor should one person, by virtue of power as leader, dominate the deliberations.

The wise leader seeks to pull information from other sources, perhaps “plants” it with other members, if necessary, and personally comes up with “the answers” only as a last resort. Or if these options do not make sense, he/she steps down from the presider’s role and allows someone else to wear the leader’s hat for the duration of that meeting.

Substantive domination is easy because of the leader’s power position, and use of power in this way can lead to pseudo discussion and decreasing morale. “If you **know**, why should **we** bother to discuss?”

Procedural Control

Leaders also vary in procedural involvement or uninvolvement. Some believe that tight procedural control is necessary to expedite business and handle it fairly. This may be true in large groups—those in which there is much disagreement, those that are highly ritualistic, or those that make extensive use of parliamentary procedure. In such cases, contributions are channeled through the chairperson, who frequently calls upon participants, restates what they have said, and assumes all responsibility for clarifying, summarizing, etc. Such practice may be highly repetitious and cause a meeting to drag on. At the other end of the continuum are presiders who give little procedural help to the group in obtaining participation, guiding the discussion, clarifying, summarizing, etc. Thus the descriptives “tight” and “loose” are appropriate for describing this dimension of leadership.

What happens if a leader is both substantively involved and procedurally tight? Or what happens if he/she is uninvolved in substantive matters and loose on procedural matters? Obviously, both are deplorable situations. Less difficult problems are caused by either of the polar crosses—involved/loose and uninvolved/tight.

The productive leader tightens or loosens control as needed and recognizes when either is demanded. Many persons in most groups can give substantive and procedural leadership. Knowing your members and being able to call upon them to give leadership of a particular type is one way the leader can spare his or her personal load. Persons who would never dream of being “the leader” can give valuable assistance as summarizers, clarifiers or information evaluators. Why not give them the opportunity?

Conflict Management

Closely related to substantive and procedural leadership is leadership in interpersonal relations and conflict management. This type of leadership is related to climate making, regulating participation, instigating group self-analysis. It is also involved in coping with conflicts in content, procedure, and/or interpersonal relations.

To view leadership as the **influential behavior** of all members of a group, rather than the authoritative position of one, is to see leadership as a more complex and subtle phenomenon than it is often taken to be. Leadership demands within a group—even within the same meeting—may be quite fluid. A group that utilizes the broad range of leadership skills within its membership is a mature, viable organization.

Where Does The New Leader Begin?

One of the first tasks of a newly elected leader is the development of his or her leadership style. Several hours of self-analysis and introspection at the start of a term of office will pay rich dividends later. Management by objective applies to group leaders as well as to business executives. Leaders need to set personal goals, both in terms of **what** should happen and **how** it should happen.

What kinds of questions should a leader ask of him/herself? What kind of profile should be developed? How does one conduct self-analysis and introspection?

Where Do You Stand?

Uninterrupted time is a "must" if introspection is to be meaningful. One cannot spell out the exact set of questions that a leader should ask him/herself; personal modifications must be made. But the following suggest some areas that leaders need to explore in periods of reflection.

1. In the main, do I want much or little control over the group? Does the group require much or little control?
2. To what extent do I want to delegate responsibility, authority? Do I know HOW to do this? Who can assume responsibilities? What can they do to help me?
3. What are my leadership strengths? Weaknesses?
4. What resources—human and otherwise—are open to me for improving my leadership skills? Materials? Training opportunities?
5. What functions of leadership do I most enjoy? Want to keep for myself?
6. What functions of leadership do I least enjoy? Want to delegate?
7. What are the leadership demands of this group? Substantive, procedural, interactional? How do I rank these in importance? In my degree of expertise?

8. How do my views of leadership in this group differ from views of others in the group?

9. What seemed to be the leadership strengths/weaknesses of the previous leaders?

10. What do I really think about leaders and leadership?

Other Officers

Once a leader feels more or less sure of his or her leadership style, it is useful to interact with other officers and explore their feelings about leadership and how it can best work for the group. It may be useful for the new officers to sit down and talk things over with those who have held the offices previously.

Obvious advantages accrue from having old and new officers arrive at a consensus on the best leadership practices. Having past officers involved in the decision-making process should generate their endorsement and active support for any changes to be made. In this way, the residual power that they hold can be used **for** the new officers and their procedures rather than turned **against** them.

If, however, the new regime has difficulty working with the old or represents a radical change in thinking, new officers should solicit the views of the retiring leaders as resource persons, consider these recommendations, and then make their own determination about future leadership practices. In a dialogue with previous officers, the new should be active listeners rather than critics or evaluators.

Open Communication

When a group has a board or committee of officers, it is important that the president's intentions are known and understood by all. An atmosphere of doubt or suspicion can undermine the cohesiveness of the leadership group. Open communication within the board is a "must," and channels for feedback are vital. Clear communication about leadership responsibilities and the delegation of them at the start of a year can save much time and preserve relationships later on when the going gets rough.

Periodic evaluation sessions can help the leader pinpoint trouble spots and serve as a safety valve for hurt feelings.

As has been said repeatedly, "The art of being a leader is the art of developing people. At its highest peak, leadership consists of getting people to work for you when they are under no obligation to do so." It is helping people do more than they ever dreamed they could do.

A successful leader approaches the job in the spirit of a coach. He or she will kindle interest, teach, aid, correct and inspire; seek every worker's special talent; suppress his/her ego and encourage the progress of those whom he/she leads; create in the group a sense of mutual effort, directed toward a specific goal. The leader will truly lead.

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