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Leadership: Are you in charge? Should you be?

The terms “leadership” and “being in charge” are sometimes used interchangeably. The question is, should they be? Being in charge implies that you’re taking control, making decisions and telling others what to do. While those actions are sometimes required of leaders, they don’t begin to encompass what leadership is all about.

Leadership doesn’t mean dictatorship. While there are situations in which it’s certainly appropriate for a strong leader to make the decisions, most situations don’t stay that way for long. Or at least they shouldn’t. One of the primary responsibilities of a leader is to teach those who follow. As followers learn and grow, they should be encouraged to make decisions, at first with the support of a leader, and later with less supervision. If followers aren’t growing, the leader isn’t leading.

One leadership style does not fit all. Different situations require different leadership styles. Take for instance a team that is highly qualified, competent and committed, in an environment that is relatively stable. The leadership style suited to that situation is very different from the style needed for a group that is inexperienced, untrained or unsure, operating in a highly volatile environment.

Leadership is a skill, not an innate talent. While some people are more naturally drawn to leadership roles than others, the ability to lead can be learned. Leading is about teaching, rallying forces, inspiring others, gathering information and thinking through issues. These skills are acquired through observation, practice, study and being open to learning. Much of the leadership challenge revolves around dealing effectively with people. Coaching and mentoring in interpersonal communication, group dynamics, decision-making and conflict management can help even “natural” leaders lead more effectively. Relying simply on one’s sheer force of personality is rarely enough.

Leaders aren’t always right, but they are always learning. Leaders make mistakes – sometimes big ones. Leaders are, after all, human beings, and humans are fallible. One of the differences between a good leader and a poor leader is that good leaders learn from their mistakes. They examine what happened, what went wrong and how to avoid the situation in the future. Then, they keep moving. They don’t let their mistakes shut them down. The will to learn and keep moving forward is one of the characteristics of a leader.

Leaders set up their successors for success. In Jim Collins’ book, *Good to Great*, he discusses this characteristic of great leaders. Collins compared companies that performed extremely well over time to those in similar industries with similar opportunities that didn’t perform so well. One characteristic he found was that leaders in less-than-successful companies were far more likely to set up their successors for failure, to choose weak successors, or both. Great leaders understand their own value and don’t have to make themselves look good at someone else’s expense. This understanding lets them build companies, build up other people and build for the future.

If you’re interested in studying leadership and improving your own skills in that area, you might want to read *Good to Great*. It has been around for a number of years, but the leadership principles are timeless. You might also read books at two opposite ends of the scale: one by a leader that you think is much like you and one by a leader that you think is very different from you. See how both have used personal qualities to lead effectively. Learn from the lessons of both.

Whether you’re an experienced leader or just starting out, the key to your success is a willingness to learn. Take time to observe and learn from others. Study what makes other leaders successful. Always seek feedback. Never stop learning. A leader who isn’t interested in learning to become a better leader might as well not be one.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations’ life cycle. MKS&H’s organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Margaret Wilson at 410-296-6200 or via email: margaret@mksh.com.

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