

“Leadership, Leadership, Leadership” Are We All Chanting the *Wrong* Mantra?

By Colm McCormack. February, 2009.

Is it Really “Leadership”?

What exactly does a leader do? We are told he or she sets the vision for us. They get us to move toward it. They inspire us. They generate buy-in, commitment and trust. But the actual truth is that he or she *manages* the vision of an organization, *manages* your perception of them, *manages* their own behavior and the way he or she expresses attitudes and opinions. For me, everyday leadership is simply management of higher level things: everything in life comes back to management.

And the truth is this: management and leadership activities, roles, and characteristics – in the overwhelming majority of on-the-ground everyday work places – are embodied in the one person, not two different people.

I’ve devoted a full chapter to this topic in: *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others*, the first book in my “Just Manage It!” series.¹

Our Stolen Focus

The focus of the business world has been totally hijacked in recent years by academics focusing on Leadership. The overwhelming majority of research on the topic is concentrated in and emanates from the United States. Leadership’s place on many business college curricula is muscling out time

usually devoted to other topics. Everyone wants to be a Bill Clinton, a Jack Welch, an Obama.

Hero worship has been so absorbed into the western - particularly the American - psyche. Everyone wants to be a leader, a hero. Workers use the term leader almost as a shortcut to success: ‘That’s it – I’ll become a leader!’ I occasionally hear football commentators referring to wide receivers who catch a football or soccer players who receive a pass as “demonstrating *real* leadership”. Simply baffling!

The words ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ have become far too fashionable. They are bandied about with little care or consideration.

Effectively Flexible

A manager who can manage himself should be able to switch between the various styles demanded by the times. Most of us do not have the luxury of switching managers whenever the times dictate. There are employment laws of varying strength in different countries around the world. It takes time to notice a shift in the external environment. It takes time and expense and upsets many apple carts ditching a manager and replacing and training a new one.

Just think about what a lot of books out there are advocating: things change so get a different person with a

¹ Go to: www.ColmMcCormack.com for FREE chapter downloads and to order your copy.

different style of leadership. Oh yeah? Think time lag, cost, the effects on everyone around the old and new leader, the potential threat to the culture of your company, etc. You might switch leader but what else might you inadvertently alter?

Setting the Bar Too High

Leadership is of course an important subject in an overall basket of subjects. But there is the danger that over emphasizing the subject sees us setting the bar too high for ourselves in normal everyday working life.

In recent times, the solution seems to be this: "I'll become a Jack Welch, a Reagan, a Clinton, or an Obama. That's all I need. Become a leader".

The truth of course is that not everyone can become such people. But if they said to themselves, "I'll *manage* like Jack Welch, or Reagan, or Clinton, or Obama", a more realistic objective comes into being.

Diving In With Both Feet

There are three things to keep in mind when looking at people diving into all the leadership books:

- Many believe leadership is *all* they need to study to become successful
- They think this will give them a short-cut to the top
- Current successful leaders in the public eye offer up a mirage: you don't see the years of hard work, dedication, commitment, and failure that went into getting them to where they are. A 300-page book won't get you past all *that* stuff.

Don't Forget About the Barriers

There are times when leadership simply cannot take place. Rules, agreements, stipulations – and more – can act as leadership substitutes. Sometimes people are so well trained, and/or the workplace so well systemized and optimized that leadership is down right unnecessary.

But you'll always have to manage yourself. You'll always have to manage communications, attitudes, perspectives, the way other people interact with you and amongst themselves. Management is a more common requirement than leadership.

The Irony of Management

The weird part in all of this is that very often when you come to be seen as a truly effective manager, people stick the "leader" label on you.

This is why I tell people not to worry about setting themselves up as a leader. Manage yourself effectively, adopt context suitable approaches to situations, and – over time – the leadership label will be handed to you.

Again, I am firmly of the view that leadership is simply the management of higher order things: it's *all* management. Read any leadership book out there and it seems the words "manager" and "management" pop up more than the word "leader". A leader and a manager *are* the same person.

Old Wine in New Bottles

It is far too easy to arrive at the mistaken assumption that becoming successful and effective is simply a matter of studying leadership. The bookshelves are stacked with titles that

give off this impression and they're being read by time-pressed individuals seeking the ultimate quick fix. But these books are simply teaching management. Has the word *management* become so unpalatable that we must now teach it

through the back door – under a different heading?



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