



Political Leadership and Leader's Behavior Categories

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Abstract:

Without the basics of organizational management in place, experimenting with alternative approaches to leadership is risky. The basics include appropriate supervision, effective communication and decision making, and having a clear strategy, sound financial management systems, and ongoing mechanisms for planning and allocation of work. These basic systems do not necessarily need to be exemplary, but they cannot be so problematic that a focus on leadership will not be sustained and supported. In fact, some of the participants used a political leadership approach to improve their organizations' basic management practices. The Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), for example, engaged a team of staff leaders from every level of the organization in planning for an all-staff retreat to develop the standards of a healthy, leaderful organization. At the other end of the spectrum, two organizations that attempted to shift responsibility to senior staff experienced problems because of unclear roles and responsibilities. When this happens, organizations need to stop what they are doing and work on basic management practices before continuing with their effort.

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Introduction: Leader Behavior Categories:

Two categories of leader behavior emerged in the literature: leader behaviors that targeted productivity and leader behaviors that targeted group affect. Variations have labeled the categories as directive and supportive behaviors (Blanchard, Zigarmi & Zigarmi, 1985), concern for production and concern for people (Blake & Mouton, 1985), and initiation of structure and consideration (Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodman, 1995) and transactional and transformation leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990.). Some even categorized the difference as management or leadership (Kotter, 1990).

Kotter offered that management is concerned with providing order through deliberate steps of planning, organizing, and controlling resources to produce business outcomes; while leadership is concerned with motivating people to accomplish organizational goals.

Political Leadership . . . It Sounds Good but What Is It Exactly?

Theories about organizational transformation have been pointing in the direction of political leadership for more than three decades now. Experiments with "self-managing" work teams proliferated in the 1980s. In 1990, Peter M. Senge published *The Fifth Discipline* and popularized the concept of "learning organizations," which called for leadership rooted in the roles of steward, teacher, and designer guided by continuous development of a capacity for understanding, action, and responsibility.¹ In 1994, Jack Stack made waves with his book *The Great Game of Business*, where he championed the value of practicing "open-book management" and engaging workers at all levels in an ongoing process of innovation in the private sector.² In 1999, Margaret J. Wheatley wrote in *Leadership and the New Science*, "Western cultural views of



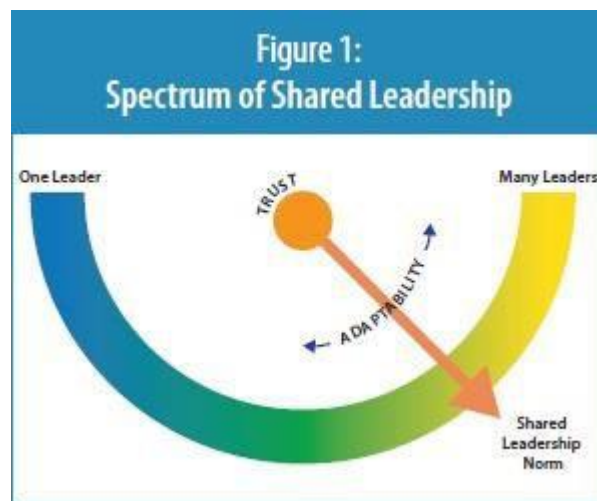
how best to organize and lead (now the methods most used in the world) are contrary to what life teaches.

Despite this dramatic shift in leadership theory, our combined research and experience with nonprofit organizations reveal that most organizations continue to accept a hierarchical structure, with the executive director shouldering an enormous burden of responsibility for organizational success. The LLC participants generally reported that this was true of their organizations. However, we found that this concentration of power was not because executive directors were power hungry. Nor was it even deliberate. It was due to a lack of familiarity with the alternatives. The executive directors were interested in exploring ways to empower staff through more formally political leadership, given their growing fatigue and their commitment to promoting values of community engagement and empowerment. Senior staff, feeling stretched thin and yet underutilized, were also invested in this change, viewing it as a way to advance their careers and develop other staff in a manner that aligned with their organizations' social justice values.

We came to understand political leadership as

encompassing a spectrum between more authoritarian models, which focus on one leader, and more inclusive models, which focus on the leadership of many (see Figure 1). We also discovered that there are dozens of ways leadership can be political once authority is expanded beyond an individual position to the group—without fully ceding authority to that group. Among the participating organizations, authority—over what, with whom, and through which structures—varied significantly. However, three characteristics were common to all the organizations:

- **Adaptability within the Spectrum.** Knowing when a particular expression of leadership is appropriate, and being able to shift within the spectrum as needed.
- **Orientation toward Political Leadership.** Expanding the problem-solving capacity of an organization without giving up the option of top-down approaches when necessary.
- **Culture of Trust.** Developing the relationships needed to shift within the spectrum when necessary, without any negative impact or mistrust.



Adaptability within the Political Leadership Spectrum

Adaptability means being able, as a group, to

occupy the right place in the spectrum for each situation. In a presentation to the participants, Ken Otter, Director of Leadership Studies at



Saint Mary's College of California, used the analogy of maps to illustrate this point. If one is in New York City and needs to get from Brooklyn to Staten Island without a car, a public transportation map is useful; if one wants to understand how public health resources are distributed in New York City, one needs a different map. Similarly, an organization needing to terminate an employee may need to use a top-down approach. When developing a new program, however, leveraging internal resources and external relationships is likely more useful. To achieve the best results, we need multiple maps and the ability to know when to use which one.

Orientation toward Political Leadership

Political leadership requires that staff be willing to see the big picture and take ownership for the whole organization. An executive director cannot decree this orientation; nor can it take root without senior leadership. A political leadership orientation is more of an invitation for all staff to assume greater responsibility and influence. Not everyone wants this, however; occasionally, staff members will leave the organization when this approach is

implemented. But if political leadership does not become a broadly political orientation, not much change is possible.

Trust as a Foundation for Political Leadership

Political leadership requires some trust, and then tends to increase trust. Allen and Morton, Patrick Lencioni, and many others underscore this point.⁷ The first step takes a certain leap of faith: "Will my staff follow through?" "Will my executive director give me room to try new things?" The participants reported that taking these sorts of risks helped build trust among staff and allowed for more flexibility to shift along the leadership spectrum. They also identified several helpful practices, including aligning values, clarifying accountability, explicitly supporting experimentation, and consistently working toward clear communication.

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Prerequisites for Political Leadership

Political leadership requires a certain amount of individual and organizational maturity. The most successful participants started with four common characteristics (see Figure 2):



1. An explicit commitment by senior leadership to change;

2. An up-front investment of time to educate and plan;



3. Fundamental management practices in place;and
4. Engagement and accountability.

These characteristics provided the necessary foundation to support a shift toward political leadership. Moreover, they tended to feed one another in a “virtuous” cycle, where improvements in one area led to improvements in others. When any of the characteristics were not present, we found that it was more difficult—if not impossible, depending on how many characteristics were missing—to achieve much change.

Up-Front Investment of Time

Cultivating political leadership takes significant time, and most likely *reduces* efficiency in the short term. After all, it involves changing (often increasing) the frequency and duration of contact among staff, shifting the nature and quality of these interactions, and developing the systems and structures that will sustain these changes. However, when faced with such complex challenges as the need to increase impact using fewer people and dollars, the time spent up-front helps organizations respond more effectively and efficiently.

At the end of the initiative, participants reported having saved time through improved problem solving, especially by generating alternatives that would not have been thought of by the executive director alone. Some also gained organizational efficiencies, as work responsibilities shifted and staff morale and satisfaction improved. Moreover, developing political leadership often went hand in hand with a focus on “continuous improvement”—the drive to be more efficient and effective.

Engagement and Accountability

Senior leaders cannot be loners. Part of their responsibility is to actively work with other staff leaders to figure out how to make systems work better. This dimension of the job description must be explicit, and something for which people are held accountable. At East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), leaders within

the management team met regularly to discuss how to engage all staff throughout the organization in leadership. Leadership responsibilities became part of job descriptions, were discussed at regular supervisory meetings and performance reviews, and were integrated into trainings for new and newly promoted employees. As a result, managers became more confident in their roles and shifted their departmental culture so that staff no longer expected the executive director to resolve all their challenges.

But sharing responsibility does not always make things better. Sometimes the “right balance” means less sharing. If an individual is unable or unwilling to handle leadership responsibilities, the executive director must recognize this and transparently limit the authority and discretion of the individual. At one organization, for example, the executive director found that too much independence and discretion had been given to program directors. To bring back order to the management team, the director quickly created sharper boundaries around roles and responsibilities. This meant a *decrease* in some staff’s ability to exercise leadership independently—at least temporarily.

Conclusion:

Developing political leadership takes focus and energy. Despite the economic and political climate, most organizations participating in the initiative were able to create the structures, processes, and relationships that foster systems thinking and leadership development across all staff. These organizations’ leadership capacity has expanded, because multiple leaders are responsible for advancing the organization’s mission, leaders are more comfortable soliciting and using suggestions from others, and they are more likely to work in partnership with others, both inside and outside their organizations. This reduces the stress and potential burnout on the part of executive directors, while helping to advance, develop, and retain other staff. The result is a healthy working environment that is aligned with democratic values of inclusiveness,



participation, and empowerment. In many cases, political leadership has also led to programmatic changes, and many of the participating organizations are beginning to think about how to expand the concept of political leadership to their boards and allies. Popular leadership books often use the phrase "born leader" to describe those who possess a natural ability to lead others. What many fail to mention is the number of "natural" leaders who had help along the way. It can take years to become an overnight success. If you are willing to do the work and follow this advice, you can certainly cut that time in half. Here are 10 leadership tips for succeeding all around:

1. **Move forward by looking backward.** Have you been successful because of your leadership, or in spite of it? I've watched time and time again as companies and leaders succeed in spite of poor management skills. Now, imagine the levels of success they could have achieved if those who were in charge had great leadership skills? Or even just good leadership skills? Gather feedback about your management style and adjust accordingly.
2. **Lead by example.** Behave as you would want your employees to behave, but also understand that your role is different from that of your employees.
3. **Surround yourself with the right people.** Hire for fit, train for skill, and if the opportunity presents itself, hire people who are better than you. Be prepared for the arrival of new hires so they immediately feel connected to the organization.
4. **Stop the blame game.** It's always someone or something that is at fault. But in the end, the buck stops with you. Sure, you may not have inherited a stellar team, but that doesn't mean you have to settle for mediocrity. You have the power to inspire people to exceed expectations. You also have the power to release people who aren't making the grade. What you don't get to do is blame everyone else for your team's failure to perform.
5. **Cut your losses early.** Mismatches happen, no matter how good you are at interviewing. Take action quickly to avoid having the rest of the team distracted by a poor hire.
6. **Invest in yourself and your people.** Can you name one organization that has cut its way to exceptional customer service? I can't. It's time to put your money where your mouth is. If your firm prides itself on customer service then invest in more people to reduce the wait times, especially during peak calling hours. And while you are at it, give your employees the tools and training they need to provide exceptional service.
7. **Build on strengths.** Everyone focuses on improving weaknesses. You can distinguish yourself by paying particular attention to areas of strength, as this is where you'll receive the greatest return for your investment.
8. **It's better to be respected than loved.** As human beings, we have a natural tendency to want to be loved. But what happens when your desire to be loved interferes with your ability to lead? Effective leaders recognize it is more important to be respected by their people than adored. They make the tough decisions that are needed to secure the future of those around them, including their direct reports.
9. **Your success depends on the success of others.** To succeed as a manager, you will need to shift your focus from "me" to "we." Going forward, your success will no longer be measured by your individual contribution. Instead, you will be evaluated on your ability to create and maintain a highly engaged team that is willing to give it their all.
10. **Find a coach or a mentor.** You are ultimately responsible for your own success. If you are lucky, you may get approval to attend a training session this year. It's a start, however training isn't going to ultimately get you where you



want to go. Find a coach or a mentor who can swiftly guide you through the landmines that exist in every organization.

Leadership is both a research area and a practical skill encompassing the ability of an individual or organization to "lead" or guide other individuals, teams, or entire organizations. The literature debates various viewpoints: contrasting Eastern and Western approaches to leadership, and also (within the West) US vs. European approaches. US academic environments define leadership as "a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task". Leadership seen from a European and non-academic perspective encompasses a view of a leader who can be moved not only by communitarian goals but also by the search for personal power.

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