

THE LEADERSHIP ENIGMA: Assuring Competence in Diverse Roles

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Those who rule, run, direct, command, manage, coach, guide, supervise, motivate, and influence our organization's future *may* be leaders. The term has been used loosely. The literature is often unclear as to whether leadership or something else is involved when a person has dominion or influence over others.

Bass said, in his 1990 *Handbook of Leadership*: "There are almost and many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." Nonetheless, a consistent part of most definitions is that leaders need followers. *Self-leadership* is a misnomer.

Followers may or may not be subordinates. Power and control is exercised in many ways, either by exercising legitimate authority or by force of personality or influence. Methods of getting the people to pull in the same direction are coercion, coordination, organization, and motivation. In practice, it might be unclear whether the exercise of these factors is management, supervision, leadership, command authority, oppression, or something else. Whatever it is, the efforts of others are harnessed for a common cause.

In his prize-winning book, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns differentiated between leaders and tyrants, such as Hitler. Bernard Bass, on the other hand, considered the transforms that Hitler implemented in Germany to be leadership — at least before he brought total devastation to his county during World War II.

Management and Leadership

Abraham Zaleznik's classic 1977 article, in the *Harvard Business Review*, "[Managers and Leaders; Are They Different?](#)" argues that management and leadership are different roles.

Leaders are essentially *futurists* whose primary mission is to inspire work through other people — by persuasion, not coercion. Domination, alone, is not leadership. Managers work in the present to keep an operation running consistently. Leaders are expected to provide inspiration and have a long-term vision and not just be an implementer, auditor, administrator, or controller.

Nevertheless, it is not just a charismatic, imperial, or fetching style that is needed to produce positive results. It was found that good leaders actually do work that is transactional. Transactions are mundane, but important, chores that satisfy the needs of customers, followers, and accountants. All is not quid pro quo, however, so self-interest alone is not sufficient motivation. Psychological needs are also important.

Followers, in a well-led organization, willingly pull together collectively for a common goal. A unified mission trumps self-serving activities. Each person may need to subsume his or her individual rewards for common goals of the group. Something beyond pay for performance is involved in an inspired organization. *But!* What is competent leadership?

Assessment of Leadership

An excellent overview on leadership, by Hogan, Curphy, and Hogan, is in the June 1994 issue of the *American Psychologist*. It is recommended that a [pdf copy](#) of this highly readable article be downloaded and perused.

Psychologists frequently study effective leaders to understand their characteristics, competence, and selection. A large 2/3% of the total publications in *PsychLIT*, an American Psychological Association citations database, was retrieved with the search term "leadership." Bernard Bass's third edition of *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership* (1990) listed over 7,000 articles, books, or presentations on the subject.

Once a suitable definition of leadership — or management — that fits a particular organization is determined, it becomes important to assure that the persons in positions of authority are capable in the specific situation.

Competence and Incompetence

Ability of leaders is especially interesting and important because much research estimated management incompetence in the range of 50% to 75%. Considerable literature supports the contention that at least half of our leaders are ineffective.

This data has been derived from five categories of evaluation that have been used to assess leaders: (1) actual performance of their group; (2) evaluation by superiors, subordinates, and peers; (3) observations of performance in "test" situations; (4) self-ratings; and (5) interviewing derailed managers. These evaluations are of varying usefulness, but cover the options, and support the 50% figure. It is of great concern to realize that incompetence is pervasive and costly.

Of course, not all failures are due to personal characteristics, because economic and market changes may change the business environment, eliminating the need for the product or service offered. Therefore, we need to consider cases individually, but we cannot ignore the prevalence of incompetence.

Fortunately, the other side of the coin teaches us that we have a system that produces 25-50% good leaders. From these people we are able to understand the nature of competence. Once we have an idea of who is and who is not competent, we need to determine how we can identify better and worse leaders. To prosper, we need to learn from the competent.

In the United States, everybody is responsible to somebody (versus the divine right of monarchs). For over half of our nation's leadership to be incompetent, or worse, fiduciary responsibility is not being exercised in many places. There are many oversight groups and persons that are not holding incompetent leaders accountable for malfeasance and misfeasance. It could be superiors, boards, and voters that are not replacing ineffective persons.

For this situation to exist, some combination of ignorance, tolerance, avoidance, denial, or impotence is part of the problem. Fiduciaries are not doing their job. We cannot expect people to voluntarily remove themselves from positions of privilege. A lesson of professional sports, where incompetent coaches are readily replaced, needs to be implemented.