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?