CHAPTER 11

Leadership for Mere Mortals

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Introduction

Being social animals, we humans work with others to accomplish many of our most important tasks, in all varieties of endeavors: military, political, business, or social. But those interactions can become complex; energies are often misdirected, decision-making processes can be muddled, and success can be elusive. In many of these situations, especially those in an established organization with defined goals, the difference between success and failure is leadership, the ability to affect a group of people to achieve the organizational goal. As we confront increasingly complex and challenging goals in any type of endeavor, we often ask ourselves how we can become more effective in getting people to accomplish organizational tasks that lead to the achievement of the larger goals; that is, how we can be better leaders.

Approaches that Don't Help Mere Mortals

I will introduce a basic model for leadership, a framework both to help anyone in an organization accomplish goals through people, and to help organizations assess their own leadership development programs. But first I would like to survey popular approaches to leadership that, in my opinion, do not address the realities and complexities that leaders face. The first approach is the “Here's what I've done” genre, where someone who has achieved significant success in the military, business, politics, or sports describes his or her approach to leadership, and how it led to success in the given endeavor. I am not saying that some benefit cannot be derived from these works; in the best cases, these stories can inspire. But my biggest concern about this genre is that we should never lose sight of the specific context in which these people succeeded. If the context in which these people succeeded had changed, would they have been as successful? If they exercised their style of leadership in a different situation, would they have succeeded? In other words, how universal are their lessons? In the worst cases, a few of these authors come across as self-serving braggarts who may have simply been lucky in a specific set of circumstances.¹

¹ The one great exception to this genre that I will offer is Wooden on Leadership, by John Wooden, perhaps the greatest coach in American sports history. (He coached his college
The next problematic approach is the peddling of the secret elixir that will make anyone a successful leader. Countless studies show that our brains don’t do well with complexity, and we instinctively seek quick solutions to problems. As a result, we are susceptible to confident assertions that something, especially something novel, is the “answer.” We are often told, for example, that practices like communications or collaboration are the keys to success in leadership. What I intend to show with my leadership model is that each situation can be different, and these prescriptions of a magic elixir are simply not very helpful. One popular derivative of the magic potion approach is the aspirational solution. This approach identifies a single trait or tool that has great emotional appeal, such as consensus, as the key.

Unfortunately, too often the advocacy for these solutions is driven more by aspiration (“wouldn’t it be better if we could just...”) than by what actually exists. For example, it would indeed be wonderful if we all had the time to gain consensus for our decisions. But in the real world, gaining consensus requires a considerable amount of time, a luxury that we often don’t possess. Also, in many cases our subordinates don’t want to be bothered with something that they expect their superiors to decide. The reality is that often leaders must make quick decisions on their own, and then sell these decisions to their group as the decisions are being executed, using a set of tools ranging from direct authority to indirect influence. Therefore, advocating a secret ingredient, especially an aspirational one, as the key to successful leadership is unrealistic; our world is far more intricate than that.

Another approach is the diagnostic of individual style. There are several of these tools available, based either on theoretical constructs (such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator<sup>2</sup>) or on empirical studies with large databases for comparisons (such as the Leadership Potential Indicator). While any tool that generates more self-awareness certainly has some inherent value, I often wonder how effective these assessments can be for a leader in a specific, challenging situation, because we, as mere mortals, are prone to exaggerate our own abilities, rather than objectively applying facts. For example, when viewing an

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<sup>2</sup> team (UCLA) to ten national championships in the 1960s and 1970s.) Wooden, whose character was as legendary as his success on the basketball court, stated, “I know that ‘one size fits all’ doesn’t apply when it comes to leadership... Nevertheless, I hope you’ve found something in my own experience and conclusions that will benefit you and your organization.” If the other authors of the “here’s what I’ve done” genre could be only half this straightforward and humble, we would all derive much more from their experiences. Regarding different contexts, however, it is sobering to consider if Wooden’s approach would have worked in the NBA, or even in (US) collegiate athletics today.