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Leading and Managing: “What’s the Difference?”

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As executive coaches, clients often ask us, “What’s the difference between leading and managing?” Why the confusion? Part of it comes from the fact that people often use the terms interchangeably. For example, one might refer to the leadership of a company or the top management of a firm. In this context, there is no harm in interchanging terms. However, these terms can have vastly different meanings sometimes.

When someone says, “You need to show more leadership” or, “An effort you are managing isn’t headed in the right direction,” he or she is getting at the difference between leading and managing. It is in those circumstances that we need to know the difference; not in formal titles or broad statements about the leadership and management of an organization.

In this work context, the critical difference is that leading is about change and direction; managing is about achieving results given a direction. If your charge is to run something well, then that requires management. When change is needed, that is mostly about leadership.

To illustrate the difference, consider the following example: She “led the expedition.” It would catch your attention if we said, “She managed the expedition.” Why is that? Part of the reason comes from the wide variability in what can happen on most expeditions. So many things can happen during an outing, there needs to be a leader. Now, there are parts of the expedition that need managing – e.g. the food and water supply. There might be an expedition leader and expedition manager. The manager’s role is to keep things running smoothly, and the leader’s job would be to deal with issues that may arise and to make key decisions.

To understand this further, a very good reference is John Kotter’s book “What Leaders Really Do.” It gets at the difference by looking at what leaders and managers do and do differently. He outlines the distinctions in several areas: agenda, people, and execution. Let’s look at several to understand them and be able to apply it.

In the beginning of an effort or the development of an agenda, the manager needs to create a plan to achieve a given set of objectives. The manager needs to plan out the details of who will do what. In the example above of managing the expedition’s food supply, that objective is usually fairly well-defined within the context of the larger expedition. So, one of the first steps the manager would

undertake is creating a plan. It would involve what is needed each day, taking into account the number of people, nutritional needs, etc. A leader, on the other hand, needs to start with a vision; a direction of where to go. In practice, a good leader will have a vision he or she can "paint" for you. It should be well thought out (not some hurried description) so that everyone can see the same vision.

When it comes to people, the manager's job is one of organizing and staffing to achieve the result. It is getting the right people into the right roles. The manager needs to know his or her people, what they can do, can't do, and what they will need for resources. Leading, on the other hand, has to do with aligning people towards a new direction. It involves describing a change or direction in ways that people can understand and "see" for themselves.

A third area is execution. Here the manager's job is one of implementing and executing the plans. It involves problem-solving and exerting control over activities. The manager needs to keep things running well and headed towards the given direction. The manager needs to deal with problems that come up and address them. Conversely, the leader needs to motivate and inspire people to buy into the new direction. Leaders need to draw considerably on influence skills. Managers need to persuade mostly through "telling" and leaders need to persuade through "selling."

Given these differences, the point is not about one versus the other; it is not "either or." Rather in practice, it is an "and" and often times a matter of degree. Most efforts do need a blend.

With the difference described above, the next step in your own leadership and management capability is knowing which is needed, and when. The first step is being aware. Ask yourself, "Is this a leadership moment or a managing one?" By asking and answering explicit questions, you can develop what is needed for the particular situation. The second step is making the asking of these questions more regular and maybe even a habit. A good way to achieve this is by making it part of your regular routine. Look ahead and see where leadership or managing moments are likely to occur.

In summary, the characteristics of what one needs to do for leading and managing are indeed quite different. Leadership efforts focus on describing a change or direction and motivating people toward it. Managing well focuses efforts on achieving results for a given direction. They require different skills and capabilities.