

Leaders vs Managers: Adaptive Leaders Pursue Change; Old Style Managers Cling To The Past

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates recently criticized the US military for not doing enough to support soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, singling out the Air Force for adapting too slowly to the new enemies on those battlefields. He blamed military leaders who are “stuck in old ways of doing business”. That may sound strange to hear coming from a senior government official who knows full well that the military is steeped in the tradition of command and control leadership that creates a top-down management style and fosters orderliness and predictability, rather than innovation and adaptability.

But in a world of chaos and ever changing conditions, Mr. Gates realizes that the ability to change and adapt is key to military success: What worked well in the past may now be an outmoded and ineffective approach.

Mr. Gates is pointing out a truism that US business organizations of all types and sizes have witnessed and/or experienced during the past 75 plus years: Unadaptive organizations underperform and/or fail in the long run. Companies like Sears & Roebuck, K-Mart, Pam Am, Howard Johnsons, Armour & Company, Westinghouse Electric are examples of businesses which were once at the top of their industrial sectors only to be toppled by competitors who looked into the future, adapted and out performed them. And the way their competitors did it was with adaptive leaders, not top-down managers.

So what's the difference between the two?

Consider top-down managers first. These managers, for the most part, are predominantly linear thinkers. Linear thinkers are rational, logical and analytical. They are mainly concerned with the present, not the future. They tend to stick with things that have worked well in the past as opposed to experimenting with the unfamiliar.

They are very organized individuals who value orderliness and predictability. They favor rules and procedures to ensure that orders from the top are followed through to the lowest level. Their mentality is that managers think, workers do (as they are told)...an idea generated by the father of management science, Frederick W. Taylor during the early 20th century. This approach worked fine back then, during the early US industrial economy. But today, things are quite different. We are now living and working in a knowledge economy.

If you have ever worked for one of these authoritative managers, you know first hand how autocratic and controlling they can be. Gather a group of these linear thinkers and place them at the top, running the organization, and guess what you get? A very rigid top-down organization that does everything by the rules, creating a bureaucracy that stifles innovation and creativity making it short-sighted, inflexible and unadaptive.

Enlightened, adaptive leaders are much different from top-down managers. They tend to be more non-linear in their thinking. These leaders are more intuitive, have greater insight, and are more creative. Being more conceptual, they see the “big picture”, are futuristic oriented, possess holistic insight and emotional intelligence.

They have greater spontaneity and flexibility—a balanced integration of rational analytical and unconventional imaginative processes. They have the ability to take a new perspective to an old complex problem and reassemble interrelated parts of the problem in novel and unusual ways leading to a viable solution. They are much better at coping with the non linear complex nature of the competitive context of our global business environment.

One would think that most of these adaptive leaders head up the newer hi-tech companies like Apple, Google, Nintendo, Microsoft and Amazon.com. But if you look at the recent list of the top 25 innovative companies recently compiled by BusinessWeek (4/28/2008), you may be surprised to find more traditional companies such as General Electric, Toyota Motor, Hewlett Packard, Wal-Mart, and Proctor & Gamble included on the list with the newer hi-tech companies. These more traditional companies have adaptive leaders who are building cultures that value creative people in good times and bad.

The good news is that managers can change and become more adaptive leaders just as traditional companies can become more innovative. As a corporate executive leadership coach, I have worked with hundreds of managers and executives for the past 20 years and I have witnessed a transformation of many individuals who have changed from top-down managers to adaptive leaders. All thinking and behavior can be changed...it is called learning. Through assessment, self awareness, action learning, and coaching, managers can become more effective and adaptive leaders.

In essence, my experience, research and observations have led me to conclude that the assertion, “Leaders are born, not made,” is a myth.

About the Author

Stan Truskie, Ph.D. is President of MSD Leadership Consultants Inc. a Pittsburgh based firm specializing in executive coaching, change management,

and leadership development with Fortune 500 companies.He is author of Leadership in High Performance Organizational Cultures and has appeared on TV/Radio. <http://www.mslead.com>

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