

Leadership and Problem Solving in Changing Times

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This article presents a case for an open systems approach within organizations to deal with change and problems accompanying change. Behavior and skill requirements for leadership in an open systems environment are presented.

Today's leaders and organizations are confronted with a magnitude and complexity of world change that strains the coping and leadership capabilities of traditional management structures. We face rapid technological advances, knowledge explosion, struggles of women and minorities for political and economic enfranchisement, limited raw materials, increasing environmental and social blight, inflation, shifting third world policies, and collisions of diverse values and philosophies. The world view upon which bureaucratic structures is based is no longer functional. We must now seek alternative ways to organize human energies toward common ends.

These changes are already having dramatic and significant effects on requirements of leadership in organizations. For example, a noticeable trend in management and supervision is embodied in the report by Peters and Waterman (1982), *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*. Interviews with top management in the best run companies in the United States revealed eight features in common among management philosophy and process:

- Bias for action
- Closeness to customer

- Autonomy and entrepreneurship
- Hands on, value driven
- Stick to the knitting
- Simple form, lean staff
- Simultaneous loose-tight

Most profoundly, underlying all of these criteria for success is the firm belief that *productivity comes through people*. Thus, the business of management and supervision is people.

Many other contemporary practices and theories underscore the importance of the human element in organizations. Ouchi (1982) described and explained a significant factor in the increased effectiveness of Japanese industry. There, quality control circles are the mode of managing production. Quality control circles are made up of teams of workers who are collectively responsible for certain specified aspects of production—quality and quantity. The workers include managers, supervisors, and foremen, as well as assembly line people. In general, management's responsibility is in creating an environment that stimulates openness, trust, confidence, loyalty, and dedication to self, product, and the organization.

Leadership in Problem Solving

The kinds of problems brought on by the changes enveloping organizations are not likely to have a given solution or a right answer; rather they will have a most ade-

quate, or best answer, all things considered. Generally speaking, problems that do not have a predetermined, right or wrong answer are best managed within an open systems orientation. Such an orientation considers the process, or way in which problems are approached, to be more important than imposing a specific structure upon the solution. Free and open human interaction is seen as more effective than an impersonal chain of command hierarchy down which solutions are passed.

This approach to problem solving suggests that people as a group, rather than as individuals, need to be actively involved. Research has shown that decisions made through collective action beget greater commitment and usually result in better decisions (two heads are better than one).

There is a caveat to conclusions about effective collective actions. Just having four or five people sit down together and talk about solutions will not guarantee effective resolutions and commitment. The reason is that no two people have exactly the same perception of a situation, and most people find it difficult to see another's point of view or to appreciate a different way of thinking, feeling, and acting. An open systems approach views these differences as strengths and encourages, almost dictates, that such differences surface so that the best will win out.

Leadership incorporating an open systems orientation and process in problem solving must be a shared responsibility among all people involved. Rather than seeing leadership as a *role* to be filled by the "boss," it must take on the characterization of a *set of functions* to be performed by anyone seeing the need. These functions include a similar variety of things generally seen as responsibilities for a designated or assigned leader. Most important among them, however, include: encouraging participation by bringing people into discussions; protecting minority views; assuring accurate communication among participants; summarizing progress; and questioning the appropriateness on the order of agendas, etc. The hypothesis is that the more the functions of leadership are shared and performed among all participants, the more productive and creative that group will be.

Leadership Requirements and Skills

Skills required by leaders taking an open systems approach to problem solving cen-

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ter around interpersonal communication and understanding human behavior. An important human behavior within any perspective on leadership is motivation. There are many explanations, often conflicting, of human motivation. Most of us organize our knowledge around assumptions and act accordingly. Four assumptions basic to shaping our approaches to leadership center around the following questions and statements.

Can You Motivate Others? A frequently heard complaint among leaders is, "My people just aren't motivated!" This is a logical conclusion when we assume that *we* can motivate *others*. Under the influence of this belief, failure to meet expectations is equaled with a lack of motivation. Thus, the conclusion may be that the job is to fill that vacuum in order to raise the person's productivity. Depending upon our style, we may try to inspire, support, manipulate, or coerce the person in an attempt to provide motivation that is lacking. The question is: *Can we motivate others?*

Are People Motivated? All behavior is motivated. By recognizing this fact, we can look for the individual motivation already existing in each person. Existing motivation may result in behavior that we believe is either productive or unproductive. The fact is that when people do not do what we think they should do, at the time and in the manner in which we expect, we conclude they are not motivated. The question is not whether the person is motivated, rather, what is the problem and how can it be resolved?

They Do It For Themselves, Not You. Regardless of the diversity in direction, all people are motivated. *They do things for their own reasons, not ours.* This may seem selfish, but the concern about self cannot be underestimated in importance. People cannot instill self-respect in others if those others do not feel good about themselves. As leaders, we may not like how certain people pursue their own interests, but we cannot fault them on their interest in themselves.

Solution? If all people are motivated, do things for their own reasons, and cannot be motivated by others, what is the solution? What *can* leaders do?

What is needed is a system, based on fact and not assumption, which organizes our knowledge. It is important to identify the individual differences in styles and motivations and to apply appropriate approaches. *Leaders need to develop ways of*

creating environments in which people motivate themselves.

Creating Self-Motivating Environments

Creating environments wherein people are self-motivating is not a simple or easy task. Humans are very complex beings, and they must be dealt with on an individual basis when creating environments most conducive to success. This complexity is most noticeable in recognizing the fact that all of us have, throughout our lives, accumulated personal experiences. These experiences have been with a myriad of people, things, places, and events and within varied social, family, play, and work settings. Through these experiences, each of us has developed our own behavior patterns—distinct ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

These patterns of behavior are the unique strengths within individuals. They are strengths because they are ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are cultivated to a natural state in the individual; they are almost, if not completely, automatic behaviors the individual has carefully refined and is very adept at.

These individual strengths are major factors in explaining motivation—why people behave the way they do. People are naturally inclined toward using their strengths. Granted, some, at times, may overextend certain strengths. Some may become a little too aggressive, too directive, too friendly, too possessive, etc. In these cases, a strength may be seen as a weakness—a behavior that has a negative impact on people and productivity.

The key to creating environments in which people are self-motivated is in making it possible for people to maximize their strengths. This is not the same as allowing people to do what they want to do regardless of goals, work, and productivity. Rather, it means to allow people to contribute to these ends through the use of their individual strengths.

How Is It Done? How does one create an environment conducive to self-motivation? People who tend to be effective in creating such environments are found to be successful and effective communicators. They have the skills and capabilities to make themselves heard and understood in the way in which they wish to be understood. They also have the ability to help others to express themselves clearly. Dem-

onstrating these skills helps those around them to develop confidence and trust in them, which carries over into other relationships throughout the organization. Aside from the usual communication skills (i.e., listening, empathy, eye contact, etc.), these successful communicators also show an interesting blend of additional skills and attitudes.

Successful communicators:

Recognize individuality. They recognize that each individual is unique and a product of his or her own life history. Each person has their own set of strengths and weaknesses.

Know themselves. They understand specifically why and how they tend to affect others the way they do, and why and how other people affect them the way they do.

Know their strengths and weaknesses. They maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses, which helps them to develop positive attitudes about themselves. This attitude is communicated to others and makes others confident in them.

Have ability. They know how to analyze situations in which they find themselves and the people in them so that they may identify a behavioral style appropriate to the needs of the situations and the people involved.

Recognize that styles are relative. They recognize that all styles are either more effective or less effective according to the situation. They attempt to assess which style is the most effective in each situation and to adjust their style to one more appropriate to the specific situation. This challenges people to understand and appreciate each other better, resulting in increased effectiveness.

Conclusions

As the organizational environment changes, the organization must change with it. One such change prerequisite to the continued effectiveness of an organization is in leadership within the organization. This leadership, seen as a function rather than a role assigned to one or two individuals, must be assumed in some fashion by all persons in the organization. It is the collective action of all that is required to resolve problems related to adopting changes and adjusting to their requirements.

This leadership requires skills related to developing effective working relationships with others. It rests on the theory that:

- The better I know and accept myself, the better I can know and accept others.

- The better I can know and accept others, the more effective I can be in relations with others.

The interpersonal communication and human relations courses sponsored by the International Right of Way Association exist for the purpose of helping people develop these capabilities. Most of the courses concern problem solving in the context of real estate acquisition. However, the basic principles of human behavior and leadership skills examined in these programs can surely be applied to organizational leadership as discussed above. (IRWA)

End Notes

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