

# 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.***

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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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