

The pathway to visible leadership

In every management sphere, leadership holds the key to setting the direction for organisational change and influencing people to follow that path

Different people talk about leadership from several different perspectives. Many think leadership is all about being the first, biggest or most powerful individual in a team. Some view leadership as a series of specific traits or characteristics while others see it as a blend of certain skills and knowledge. Very few view leadership as a process that places emphasis on social interaction and relationship wherein individuals are influenced, inspired and guided to achieve their personal or collective desired goals.

LEADERSHIP STYLES: Effective leadership, irrespective of the approach or style, is always an alignment of vision and values. Even in visible leadership, the most effective leaders are those who possess high vision and implement high values in every step they take. Such leaders set high standards for themselves as well as for those who follow them. They always have a vision for a desirable future and are determined to achieve it without compromising on high values.

Whenever there is an alienation of vision and values in an organisation, it is almost often because of the leader's inability to walk the talk and show a clear-cut relation between vision and values. Depending on the vision-value alignment and the level of clarity that exists between the two, four styles of leadership are known to emerge.

Low Vision-Low Values: The so-called leaders who fit into this style are not very initiative for fear of taking risks. They are neither focused on the job nor on the team and can be easily influenced. Due to a distinct lack of clear principles, conviction or values, such people are better off as followers than leaders.

Low Vision-High Values: Leaders who adhere to this style are idealists who will go to great lengths to impose their rigid values and strong convictions upon the team. Their egoistic, reactive attitude displays a marked insensitivity towards any resistance from team members. Though such leaders are extremely driven to perform, they are focused solely on the task and do not care about the people who make up their team.

High Vision-Low Values: These leaders basically have very low standards and will stoop too low to get things done. Often portrayed



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as extremely driven and over-ambitious, such leaders display arrogance of the worst kind and love to boast of the power they are entitled to as leaders. They always see themselves under a threat and since they have very few options to reach their vision, such leaders ultimately destroy the team spirit in an organisation.

High Vision-High Values: These are the most effective leaders among the four. Always open, proactive, sensitive, humble and flexible, such leaders are the ones who will walk the talk and succeed in finding innovative solutions to counter ambiguity. They are always confident with a process-driven positive attitude and they build motivation into any team they choose to be in. Leaders with high vision and high values always create their own systems which in turn benefit the entire organization.

CASE STUDIES

Dr S.S. Badrinath (Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai) Dr S.S. Badrinath, chairman emeritus, Sankara Nethralaya (SN), Qimpro Platinum Standard Healthcare 2004 and ET Corporate Citizen Awardee 2007, is one of the few living legends of visionary leadership. He founded Asia's only ISO 9002 certified ophthalmic hospital with a vision to provide quality eye care for the poor. Around 125 surgeries are performed at the hospital in a single day and 50 per cent of the operations are supported free of cost.

Thanks to Dr Badrinath's vision for the poor without vision, ophthalmology has literally taken world-class eye care to the threshold of the masses. Today, Sankara Nethralaya is the first hospital to introduce photorefractive keratectomy and laser treatment – technologies that correct refractive errors. The hospital also runs an optometry school and a research centre for stem cell and genetic therapy to find ways to cure rare types of blindness.

E. Sreedharan (Delhi Metro Corporation) Renowned as the 'Metro Man of India', Elattuvalapil Sreedharan, winner of Qimpro Platinum Standard Business 2007, is the power behind the success of the world-class Delhi Metro. As the managing director of DMRC, Sreedharan took up the Delhi Metro project under his wings and ensured its successful completion well ahead of schedule. Even amidst bureaucracy and wide-spread corruption, Sreedharan

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relied on his high vision and higher values to change the face of urban public transport in the capital. India owes her transport revolution to this visible leader who believed that his country deserves only the best.

Carlos Ghosn (Nissan) Carlos Ghosn, former CEO of Michelin North America, was asked to lead this Japanese firm with the mission to bring about change and revive the Nissan brand. Ghosn had a Middle-eastern and Latin cultural background, with French experiences. He was not well-versed in the Japanese language and was not familiar with the Japanese style of management. Many wondered if his turnaround strategy would do more harm than good for Nissan. However, under his leadership, Nissan reported the best financial performance in the history of the company, one year ahead of schedule. Ghosn's visible leadership style and Change Management Principle of consistency between what he thought, said and did was a key factor in Nissan's success.

Secondary School in KwaZulu-Natal This is a truly inspiring case study of teacher leaders in a semi-urban South African secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal. During the era of apartheid, South African schools were characterised by hierarchical and bureaucratic management structures that stifled the leadership potential of all those within the organisation. However, with the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994, a radical shift in education policy took place, making schools democratic organisations in which distributed leadership practices and collaboration became the norm. There rose several visible leaders among the teachers of this school who sought to thwart the education crisis at the school by instilling trust and confidence in the community. Their efforts to bring about a change in the role of educators proved fruitful only because of their commitment to 'walking the talking.'

The power of a leader to create an organisation's values, environment, culture and actions is far more intense than anyone can imagine. The best leaders are those who create better leaders. They 'walk the talk,' motivate others to follow their vision and achieve a set of goals in accordance with the mission of the organisation.

Legitimacy in leadership is possible only through visible leadership. In walking the talk, an important first step is to understand why a leader wishes to implement a change or improvement in his / her team or organisation. When a leader begins to behave in the way in which he / she wants others to be, such a leader will be more likely to be modelled as exemplary. ♦

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