

Leadership is Overrated!

*“We have to stop looking and waiting for better leaders to emerge and **all** take responsibility for the quality of our organizations!”*

I was facilitating a discussion with a team of field service project leaders. We were debating the role of leadership in their department when someone said we should add “to motivate their people” as one of the roles for leaders. I pushed back and said that I don’t think you can really motivate someone else and that I think we sometimes look too much to “leaders” to provide us answers. I ended by saying that “Frankly, I think leadership is overrated!” Well, you would have thought I had just spit on the American flag. These leaders got quiet for a moment and turned to each other with that “did he just say what I thought he said” look on their faces, then rallied to defend the role of “leaders as motivators.” I let the issue go because it would take us off track from our agenda. However, it did get me thinking again about our tendency to believe we need effective leaders for our organizations to succeed, and that if we don’t have effective leaders, we are destined for failure. The question that keeps going through my mind is, “When are we going to stop abdicating responsibility for the well-being of our organizations? When are we going to let go of the belief that we can’t move forward and be effective until we have the *right* people in leadership positions?”

Over the past 5 years, no matter what level I talk to in an organization (line employees, supervisors, up to VPs) they all chant the same mantra, “If only we had better leadership, we wouldn’t be in the position we are today.” Variations on this theme include: “as soon as *they*, “upper management”, get their act together, I’ll be able to do my job correctly.” And my favorite, “It’s got to start from the top!” Enough already!

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It’s not that I don’t believe we need leadership. Every organization needs people who are reminding others what the organization is trying to accomplish and why it’s important. What I am challenging is that leadership can only come from certain individuals in designated leadership positions and that these individuals have some unique ability to right the wrongs in our organizations and save the day.

I am not the first to point out that if we ever hope to reach our full potential, we need to break from this paternal model of leadership. Peter Block sounded the alarm in his 1993 piece on *Stewardship*,

*“There is the dominant belief that leadership should come from the top and bosses are in some way responsible for their employees’ performance and morale, much as loving parents are responsible for their children. Holding on to this line of thought represents the choice of dependency over empowerment.”**

Block reminds us that, as adults, we are all equally responsible for the organizations we create, but he’s also aware of how much we desperately *want* to believe in and hold onto this patriarchal model.

*“What is intriguing though, is that even though we see the costs of patriarchy, and spend half our lives complaining about those above us in the hierarchy, we still think leadership is necessary to organize effort and get work done. Our complaint is generally not about the weakness of patriarchy as a system of governance, it is that we believe we need a better patri-arch.”**

So why does this patriarchal model have such a hold on so many organizations? Unfortunately we have too many people who are all too happy to play out these parent/child interactions. On the one side, we have employees who look to leaders and in essence say, “Please protect me from the uncertainties of the marketplace, and I will work hard for you, and I’ll never question your judgment in front of others ... (Dad)” Along with employees all too willing to give up their autonomy and responsibility, we have leaders who think their role is to caretake. They seem to like the control that comes with the parent role. They try to fulfill the wishes of their employee/children. They exhibit behaviors that say, “I need to watch over you children closely, because you don’t know any better and I’m responsible for your well-being, and because of that I have to hold back certain information from you because you probably can’t handle it. But, if you do as I say, I’ll take care of you.”

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Just one of many examples of this type of parent/child exchange is the unwritten pact that if employees do whatever their bosses ask of them (regardless of whether it makes good business sense) the boss will take care of their next promotion/career move.

I have been lucky to have worked in some systems where adults were able to come together and articulate what they would like to accomplish together and why they feel it's important and then let the individual members figure out their own way to make it happen. They supported and cared for each other without caretaking. They took responsibility for their own well-being and if the system was not providing them what they were looking for, they re-negotiated with the members or sought out another system. This is the kind of alternative I try to paint for organizations I work with; one where each person takes responsibility for answering the leadership questions of *what* and *why*. There is no abdication of responsibility. No more waiting around for the "right" leader to emerge. We don't have time for that!

** Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest. Peter Block, 1993.*

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