



Leadership and Relationships

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I read a lot about “leadership”, and find it both fascinating and confusing. There are many definitions of what it means to be a “leader”. Leadership theory is simple. Putting the “practice” of leadership in motion is complex. It seems to me that “leadership” is really about human nature and developing successful relationships with other people. This gives us hope that leadership can be learned through changing our behavior and strategically improving relationships.

Leadership 101: Do you have what it takes?

There has been so much written about leadership, that it is impossible to keep up with the various definitions and theories. Some have defined “leadership” as primarily a discipline of *task* – setting a goal, and then devising strategies to reach the goal. This is certainly important, but the goal can’t be reached without involving people (or the leader’s “followers”) to help execute the strategies to reach the goal. The skill set I believe is most important to “leadership” is *the ability to develop successful relationships*. When the relationships with others – followers, key stakeholders, etc. – are healthy and successful, people are motivated to work toward the goal. The goal becomes “our” goal rather than “my” goal.

So, are exceptional leaders born or made? I believe that the *desire to lead* may be an inborn trait but the *skills* needed to lead effectively can be learned. These skills are all about the relationships leaders develop with themselves and with their followers. Developing successful relationships is the foundation for excellent leadership, and improving our ability to develop sound relationships can improve our ability to be successful leaders. Emotional Intelligence theory indicates that self-awareness—how well we “know” ourselves—and social awareness—how well we “know” others—can be improved.

Emotional Intelligence and Relationships

Daniel Goleman, who has popularized the understanding and importance of emotional intelligence (“EQ”) in business, defines EQ as consisting of five competencies:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Motivation
- Empathy
- Social skills.

The first three competencies determine how well we manage ourselves. *Self-awareness* means recognizing our own emotions, strengths and weaknesses, self-worth, and capabilities. *Self-regulation* deals with managing our emotions and impulses, maintaining integrity, being flexible, and taking responsibility for our performance. *Motivation* focuses on meeting organizational goals, taking the initiative, and maintaining excellence and optimism.

The last two EQ competencies determine how well we handle relationships. *Empathy* requires reading the feelings of others and includes developing others, leveraging diversity, and understanding the needs of others. *Social skills* deal with handling others' feelings well, thereby inducing desirable responses.

These five EQ competencies are fundamentally about relationships – with ourselves and with others – and all five are essential to effective leadership.

Leadership is complex. Emotional Intelligence teaches us that the more complex the job to be done, the more important it is for the individual to have a high level of Emotional Intelligence. The good news is that, unlike cognitive ability, or I.Q., emotional intelligence is not fixed genetically but can be learned, practiced, and improved.

Better Relationships Begin with Self-Understanding

Improving relationships is a complex process, but it all begins with *self-awareness*. Until a leader understands him or her self, he or she cannot be open to really understand others. And understanding the other person is essential to the development of good relationships.

Carole Peters was a CEO in a mid-sized organization who was leaving a trail of bodies in her drive to achieve her goals. She had been hired for her position three years previously and her direct-reports had “replenished” twice in that time, through firings and resignations. The problem was that Carole expected her staff to be as goal-driven and focused as she was, and her definition of focus included 12-hour workdays and weekend meetings.

There was no consideration on Carole's part for individual differences: some of her staff required more personal and face to face contact, others required more time to process information, some had families they needed to attend to. Carole expected her staff to meet her goals and did not allow for differences in work style or personal situations.

After the second wave of staff turnover, Carole's Board of Directors hired an executive coach to work with her. Carole and her coach began the work of “understanding self” using self-assessments and a multi-rater instrument (also known as a 360° assessment) to get feedback on her approach and style from her staff and others. Through the assessment results and discussions with her coach, Carole became aware of her role in the staff turnover situation. Carole discovered that she was expecting her staff to work in a manner that came naturally to her, but was a stretch for many of them.

Once she understood this, she could work with her coach on discovering the best way to utilize the talent reporting to her using their distinctive work and behavioral styles. This was hard work on Carole's part, but it resulted in higher morale and lower staff turnover. By beginning with herself Carole started to learn how to foster and develop relationships for improved results.

One of my favorite metaphors is the “Emotional Bank Account” concept put forth by Stephen Covey in [The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#). The concept is that we build trust in a relationship by making *deposits* and *withdrawals* in the emotional bank account we have with each person, just as we do with our checking account. Carole had learned that if her account balance was solidly on the positive side with individuals who reported to her, the account balance would take care of mistakes that she made. This allowed her some leeway as she continued to practice and learn the skills necessary to be a more effective leader. Even if she had to require a Saturday morning meeting once in awhile (a withdrawal) the overall emotional bank account balance was positive enough that the weekend meeting would not push the relationship into deficit.

I believe that in order to achieve goals, successful leaders must learn to manage relationships effectively. Driving followers toward a goal without effective relationship management will result in staff turnover, burnout and loss of motivation. Effective management of relationships *can* be learned—and we all have room for improvement in that area.