

Leadership! What does that even mean?

Fred Schindler

Editor, MicroBusiness Column

Many years ago my new boss posed a question to me. After a shake-up, he had taken over as manager of our division and was trying to decide if the organization needed to be changed. We had one very large department and he was thinking about breaking it up. I felt that it should be kept intact. He was concerned that it was too large to be effectively managed by one person. He asked how one person could manage it successfully. I answered “leadership!” To which he asked “what does that even mean?”

I don’t remember exactly what I said, but I know I didn’t have a good answer, if I had one at all. I wanted to be the new manager of that department. Instead my boss spit it up and put me in charge of a part of it. That tells you how impressed he was with my answer.

What is leadership? Does it come from the position? Is it something that is innate, that some people have and others don’t? Is it something that is learned? Is it something that can be bestowed? Or is it a meaningless abstraction?

Leadership, in its simplest definition, is the ability to lead. A person can be given a position of leadership, but that doesn’t mean they have the ability to lead. In fact I’ve seen the converse. I’ve seen an engineer that was not given a formal leadership role become the leader of a group. By setting an exemplary example, demonstrating determination for success and by strength of personality he ended up with a group that was eager to follow his lead. That is innate leadership. In my experience it is a rare quality.

More typically I’ve also seen people become very effective leaders without having that innate ability. In my experience most people develop their leadership skills once they have been given a leadership role. Some take to it easily, and some never seem to become effective leaders.

Note that I used the term “effective” instead of “successful.” I’ve seen plenty of managers succeed without being effective leaders. I don’t believe that belittling employees, intimidating them or threatening them are effective leadership techniques. But they can still succeed. In fact, psychopaths can be successful leaders [1]; you just don’t want to work for one.

I like to think of effective leadership as the ability to lead a group without resorting to abuse. Is it the more difficult path to take? I don’t think so. If you’ve read some of my previous columns you know that I think hiring the right people is the key to building a strong organization. But I don’t mean hiring people that are easy to lead. Hiring the right people means hiring people that are capable, self-motivated and personable. Think in terms of people that don’t need to be led.

Of course, even the most self-motivated people need some leadership. But it can be soft leadership, gentle nudging, coordination and positive reinforcement. Groups of people also come with group dynamics. The people in a group made up of only the very best self-motivated individuals will not naturally all agree on the same direction. Without any leadership conflict is almost inevitable.

To complicate matters even more, it almost impossible to assemble an organization made up only self-motivated people. And sometimes self-motivated people change their outlook or get a new assignment outside their comfort zone and become de-motivated. Further, managers often inherit organizations and don't have the luxury of determining its membership. In short, there is always a need for leadership.

Part of leadership is to keep the organization pointed in the right direction or directions. Part of leadership is maintaining a positive work environment. Part of leadership is making sure people cooperate with one another. Part of leadership is recognizing and rewarding achievement. Part of leadership is making sure people have the tools to do the job effectively. Part of leadership is making sure you have the right people to take on a mission. Part of leadership is making sure the projects match the skill of the people. Part of leadership is making sure goals are achievable. Part of leadership is listening. Part of leadership is encouraging. I don't see where abuse of employees is ever part of leadership.

Part of leadership is making difficult decisions. There are occasions when difficult issues need to be addressed. While it's tempting to avoid them, it is almost always best to confront them as quickly as possible. Problems tend to fester and grow. Interpersonal squabbles can turn into feuds. Project issues tend to compound. Financial holes tend to get deeper. Effective leadership means identifying problems quickly and dealing with them directly. Often this means consulting with others. Even when I think I have a good idea about something, it always becomes clearer and the solution more obvious when I talk it over with someone else. You need to take action as soon as you have developed an appropriate course of action to take.

So now let's get back to my new bosses question all those years ago. In the broadest sense I think I was right in telling him leadership was the key to managing what he considered an outsized organization. But I didn't know what that meant. I now know that it means doing a lot of things. I've listed many of them here. I'm know I'm still deficient in some of them, but at least I have an idea of what I need to work on.

In retrospect, I would have been better off actually displaying some leadership instead of trying to define what it was. I should have described a plan of what I would do to maintain that department as a vital and successful organization. Too bad I didn't realize that until years later.

[1] Babiak, Paul and Hare, Robert D., "Snakes in Suits," New York: Harper, 2006, pp 191-197.

Fred Schindler (m.schindler@ieee.org) is with RF Micro Devices, Billerica, MA