

What makes a good leader?

Some personal thoughts

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One of the defining characteristics of humans is our ability to work together. By collaborating in teams across space and time, we achieve far greater goals than we could as individuals. Not only are we brilliant at working together, but most of us actually enjoy it. In fact, if you ask people about the best experiences of their working lives, they will often tell you about a great team they worked in. The reverse is also true.

Teams are occasionally self-organising. But more commonly, at least in the workplace, we use a different way of coordinating ourselves. Under this approach some team members take responsibility for the **actual work**, whilst others take responsibility for guiding **what work is done** and **how it's carried out**. As a result, there's been an extraordinary amount of deeply-considered research and writing about management and leadership, as well as fair amount of less insightful pontificating (you might have a stronger word for it).

What follows is simply my personal view. It's informed by nothing more than over 25 years as a member of about the same number of workplace teams. I've had good and not-so-good leaders, and I've tried to learn from all of them. I've often been a leader – probably also good and not-so-good – and I've tried to learn from the members of all the teams I've lead.

Now, there is sometimes a debate about the difference between *leadership* and *management*. Most people in either role will be doing elements of both, of course. But if we were to pull apart these two dimensions, we might contrast them as follows:

Leader	vs	Manager
Vision		Plan
Strategy		Process
People		Resources
Supports		Directs
Transformational		Transactional
Social influence		Positional influence

We'll focus here on the left-hand column – leadership – and treat management as an equally vital but complementary set of skills. We'll also focus on leadership only in the context where I have personal experience – what we might call technical and/or knowledge-based teams. If you're the leader of a theatre group, a unit in the armed forces, or in any other context that is

manifestly unlike developing new technology products, you may have to take my advice with more than a pinch of salt.

So what, in my experience, makes a good leader?

It's about how you view your role

- Your first assumption must be that the people you're leading fundamentally **want to do a good job**. Provided that's true (and in technical or knowledge-based environments it almost always is), then your job becomes simply to help people to do it. If you're working in a context where this is not true, then these notes probably aren't for you!
- If you make the mistake of assuming the opposite – that the people you're leading are feckless saboteurs out for anything they can get, **when they're not** – you will end up wondering why you and your team are so constantly at loggerheads. Being told to do a better job by a leader who fails to realise that that's exactly what you're trying to do is frustrating, to put it mildly.
- Another way of looking at this is to imagine that you, the leader, are working for your team, and **not the other way around**. This isn't always the case of course, but in the context of leading technical/knowledge-workers, it's at least a good thought experiment, and often actually the best approach. Ask yourself, *"how can I interact with my team-members so that this is the defining logic?"*
- Viewed in this way, your job is **not to control** your team, but **to enable them**. Your job is to get out of the way.
- But don't confuse this view of leadership with letting everyone do whatever they want, when, where and however they want to do it. That's not leadership – it's anarchy. Your job as a leader is to help the team achieve your collective goal, not to preside over disorganised chaos. Which means:

It's about what your team needs

Most teams **need** leaders. They need leaders not because the individuals aren't skilled and motivated, but because the combined unit needs something more. Here's what teams need from their leader:

- Teams need **context**. Teams need to know why they're doing what they're doing. And they need frequent reminders. When, as a team member, you're focussed on the deep details of your area of responsibility, it's easy to forget the bigger picture. In fact, I think the kind of context teams need can have a half-life of as little as a week. That means it's worth reminding everyone "why we're here" at least every couple of weeks, if not weekly or daily.
- Teams need **vision**. If context is "why we're here", then vision is "where we're going". Vision is what spurs people on when they're feeling down, and it's what keeps them thinking about solving problems even when they're not at work. Vision is what makes everyone talk with passion and enthusiasm about what they're doing, and gives them a shared goal. But vision has a short half-life too. Keep talking about it all the time.
- Teams need **stability**. To get teams to do their best, you have to hold things steady whilst they do their magic. It's like glue setting. If you keep moving the goalposts or changing the context, you'll never get a good result, and team members will end up frustrated or worse.

- Teams need **protection**. Your team may be working within a larger context that's not stable. Whether that's a big organisation, the marketplace, or something else, you've got to protect and shield them from the buffeting that would otherwise threaten their success.
- Teams need **resources**. The best teams (given good context, vision and stability) can get a lot done with very little. But they still need resources, and it's your job to get them.
- Teams need **organisation**. Teams work by dividing the work between members. But this means that individual team members work on tasks that may be pointless in isolation. So for their work to have a point, every team member must be able to rely on the other parts of the puzzle being completed to a high standard by other team members. It's your job to ensure that that happens.
- Teams need **confidence**. The most worthwhile objectives are hard. You can't achieve them unless you believe you can do so. Belief is infectious, and it's your job to infect everyone and keep them infected.

It's about what individuals need

- If working together is one of the things that defines humans, then being different is surely another. No team is completely homogeneous, and some are very diverse indeed. The more you can recognise and treat people differently as individuals, the more likely you are to be effective as a leader.
- But most of us also share some common characteristics. We especially like praise, little and often. It is not patronising to tell someone they've done a great job (assuming they have), or to say *thank you*. Celebrate success. Remember to do it all the time.
- We also all have individual desires and ambitions. The more you can recognise and respond to these (often unspoken) preferences, the more your team members will respond to you.

It's about your personal behaviours

- As a leader, people will follow your example, whatever it is. You have to make sure that the ways you work and behave are the ways you want your team to emulate. Be honest. Be transparent. Be nice.
- Think about your own experiences as a team member. What did you look for – yearn for even — from your leader(s)? Do that. Then write it down ☺.