

The danger of equating leadership to hierarchy

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The general misconception I see as I do my work and interact with people is that the majority of the decision makers and ordinary people equate leadership to hierarchy. If the job carries the title “manager” therefore the person in that role must be a good manager. Such assumptions lead to a lot of bad decisions about how to develop and manage people at work. Do not assume that because a person has been put into a leadership role it therefore means they are capable of leading. There are so many incompetent people in leadership roles across our society.

I want you to reflect on what is happening at your own workplace, religious organisation, and political party and even in your family. How many people that you now know that occupy roles that carry leadership responsibility but have failed and continue to fail? The reason why they continue to fail and we tolerate it in some instances is because we have a wrong conception of leadership and how it can be developed.

John Maxwell says “everything rises and falls on leadership”. This is very true in every sphere of life. With good leaders everything seems so easy and motivating. Without good leadership everything seems so hopeless and demotivating. Research has shown that over 50% of employees leave organisations because of how they are managed. The major cause of leadership failures are not due to lack of technical capacity or domain knowledge expertise but results from personality defects; leadership derailment.

Leadership derailment takes place when individuals seemingly with high potential fail to realise that potential due to personality defects. While this problem affect individuals at all levels in the organisation and generally in life its negative impact grows as people move into leadership roles. Unfortunately personality is a permanent disposition and it rarely changes. This means whatever defects are detected they are unlikely to change regardless of coaching and training. Others have invested a lot of resources in training with marginal improvements noted but overall the leaders remain the same and stuck in their only way of doing things.

So how do you detect derailment in a leader? First such leaders are regarded as being very intelligent and it will be evident from the way they present issues. Sometimes they have excelled academically and everyone is attracted by how bright they are. What then puzzles people is the “stupid” things they do. Most of these leaders are very cruel and use fear to lead people. They set people against each other as long as it benefits them. They love to be the centre of attraction in every interaction and love the limelight that comes from being in a leadership. They rarely care about how others feel emotionally. They are very ruthless when their authority is challenged. At every opportunity they will make you feel they are the ones in charge and people must recognise that.

The biggest challenge in addressing people who are likely to derail is that they lack self-awareness. They

always view themselves as superior to other people and tend to exaggerate their own abilities. The fact that they lack self-awareness or the ability to self-introspect makes it difficult to give them feedback. They react negatively to feedback and tend to go after those who bring such negative feedback. It is reported that in the US alone the cost of top executive failures cost the economy \$13.8 billion (Stoddard and Wyckoff, 2008).

According to Tomas Chamorro writing in the Harvard Business Review it is possible to predict who is likely to emerge as a leader on the basis of their personality. Quoting meta- analysis studies he shows that people who are well adjusted, sociable, ambitious and curious are more likely to emerge as good leaders. Here is what is even more is staggering from the same studies; 53% of the variability in leadership emergence is explained by the personality factors noted above. The same leaders who are effective show high levels of integrity. Higher level of cognitive ability is also linked to people who eventually emerge as good leaders (5%).

What is more telling from the findings by Chamorro is that the qualities cited above are all largely hereditary and partly early childhood experiences. The implications therefore are that if you hire or thrust people into leadership roles without these qualities they are likely to fail. You can't address these factors through training, therefore you need to screen at entry. Chomorro in the same article estimates that 30% to 60% of leadership qualities are heritable (this is because the qualities that determine leadership success are largely hereditary; personality and intelligence). The implications of these findings for those involved in leadership coaching is that you are likely to achieve better leadership coaching results if you coach those who have leadership potential. It will be a waste of resources to coach those with personality defects.

Given the above findings it imperative of organisations to screen for leadership qualities at entry. If you decide to develop those already in your organisation check if they have the leadership potential first before you waste your resources investing in leadership training.

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