Leading without Authority: Leadership at All Levels

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ABSTRACT

The idea of what it means to be a leader takes on different meanings for each person and can vary across situations. One image is that of a manager directing a team under tight timelines. Another example would be a team member who proposes a solution to a novel problem.

At its core, leadership is the process of driving influence from others to achieve a goal. This does not require seniority, organizational hierarchy, titles or personal attributes, though these are often conflated. Anyone can be a leader, including those without direct reports. This paper examines different leadership styles and contains numerous examples of how an individual contributor can make an impact in an organization, both large and small.

INTRODUCTION

The word "leader" elicits the image of a president or a chief executive officer. Often, it is associated with significant power or influence over many individuals. But leaders can be found anywhere. The Merriam-Webster definition is rather simple, "a person who leads". This implies that at least one other person has been influenced. The person who makes dinner plans for a group is a leader. A people manager overseeing a team of programmers could qualify as well, though care needs to be taken not to confuse someone who gives orders with someone who leads.

Just as there are many different types of leaders, there are also many different types of leadership styles. Table 1 lists 5 types of leadership styles and associated descriptions.

Types of Leadership	Brief Description
Authoritarian	Full control of the team leaving low autonomy within the group
Transactional	Promoting compliance by the team through both reward and punishment
Trailblazing	Makes a new track or path for others to follow
Servant	Shares power and puts the needs of the team first
Transformational	Works with teams to identify needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration and executing the change together

Table 1. Five types of leadership

The above list is not exhaustive, but simply presents 5 leadership styles that readers may have experienced or seen during their career. You do not have to stick to a given leadership style (nor should you). Instead, you can assess a situation and decide which leadership style would be most effective.

The first two styles are reliant on authority. These are the architypes of a "boss". The authoritarian is often seen as a dictator and can drive results, but often at significant cost to employee morale leading to high turn-over rates at an organization. This style works if the leader has more experience or is seen as more knowledgeable than the team. Despite its apparent shortcomings, it can be an effective type of leadership when you are short on time, the leader has the answers, and the team is well motivated.

The transactional leader is one of the more common forms of a people manager. They work to promote those under them who do their job well and punish those who do not. Unlike the authoritarian approach, this allows the team some control over their outcome, although it will promote competition among the team and can create expectations for those who feel that they have upheld their end of the transaction and are waiting for their reward. Such a leadership style needs to be applied consistently to all team members in order to be effective.

Both the authoritarian and transactional leadership style works well within a vertical organization, where there is a distinct hierarchy.

But the main goal of this paper is to take a deeper dive into the 3 other leadership styles that do not rely on explicit authority, more specifically, Trailblazing, Servant, and Transformational leadership. These can be exhibited by individual contributors within an organization and do not require a title of "manager".

After discussing the various types of leadership styles, the paper further explores strategies for effective communication, as well as leadership pitfalls to watch out for and how to overcome these pitfalls. These are tools that enhance the effectiveness of any leader.

This is a reflection paper based on the author's experiences. The examples and discussion within this paper may differ from the reader's own experiences.

THREE LEADERSHIP STYLES NOT REQUIRING AUTHORITY

This section focuses on 3 leadership styles that do not rely on authority. They represent styles of leadership that an individual contributor can demonstrate within an organization but are also styles that a people manager can employ.

Within each section, four main questions are addressed:

1. How does this style of leadership drive influence or make an impact?

2. What is a relatable example?

3. What are the defining attributes of that type of leader?

4. What are challenges to implementing this type of leadership?

At the end, a table summarizes these styles and compares them across these questions.

TRAILBLAZING LEADERSHIP

> *"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail"*
> *– Ralph Waldo Emerson*

How does this style of leadership drive influence or make an impact?

This type of leader takes on a specific problem where he or she is the first to try, test, and do. The result is a pathway to a solution for the specific problem, where others can choose to follow. This is an indirect style of leadership since the solution would be found even if no one else were to use it. Usually, though, it is a group (not just an individual) who is faced with the problem and it is the trailblazer who steps up to find a way forward.

What is a relatable example?

Consider a small company that has an outsourcing model but is working to bring the work in-house. The lead programmer for the first in-house study will become a trailblazer. The experience from this first study will be referenced to guide decision making and planning for subsequent studies. The choices made during the first study become the foundation that shapes the processes defining how this work is to be done by future study lead programmers within the organization.

What are the defining attributes of a trailblazer?

It takes courage to make that first step into the unknown and it takes bravery to keep pushing forward, especially if unexpected things happen and setbacks occur.

What are challenges to implementing this type of leadership?

Trailblazing leadership is hard to employ when an organization does not test new things or does not face novel problems. Moreover, it is necessary for the organization to encourage and empower individuals to be proactive and take an initiative. Without this, it will be difficult to exhibit this type of leadership.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

"A sign of a good leader is not how many followers you have but how many leaders you create"
– Mahatma Gandhi

How does this style of leadership drive influence or make an impact?

This type of leader is selfless, focused on the team's success rather than their own individual accomplishments. They earn emotional currency with the team through service. Service in the sense of coaching, supporting and empowering the team. The leader focuses their efforts on what it will take to make the team members succeed in their roles. These leaders do not view their team members as working <u>for</u> them. Instead, they see their team members as people working <u>with</u> them. They think in terms of "we" not "I." The result is a high level of trust and engagement. It is through this emotional currency that the leader drives influence.

What is a relatable example?

The study lead programmer has no direct reports but laterally manages a team of programmers working on a deliverable. The study lead is available and responsive to the team, often soliciting feedback and meeting members on an individual basis to understand any roadblocks that they are experiencing. The study lead works to remove the roadblock, working to find ways to empower the individual. This leaves the team member feeling as though they worked together to solve a problem.

What are the defining attributes of a servant leader?

It takes empathy to listen, relate and understand. It takes kindness to carry out the behavior that reinforces trust and respect. It is not enough to just say the words. The words must be aligned with the actions for this style of leadership to be successful.

What are challenges to implementing this type of leadership?

If an organization's culture places emphasis on individual accomplishments and promotes competition, it may be harder for someone to use this type of leadership. Organizations that requires people managers to be primarily hands-on discourage this type of leadership, as there is insufficient time and energy to focus beyond one's hands-on tasks.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

"You can't just ask customers what they want and then try to give them that. By the time you get it built, they'll want something new." –Steve Jobs

How does this style of leadership drive influence or make an impact?

This type of leader believes that just because something works does not mean it cannot be improved. He or she challenges the status quo and works to influence stakeholders, typically those who have authority, to make a change within an organization. This involves coming up with a new idea and convincing others that they need it.

What is a relatable example?

The statistical programming group has a standard way of preparing electronic submission data packages, where files are copied and pasted manually. This method works and has yielded successful submissions leading to regulatory approvals.

Although the current standard for the statistical programming group works, a programmer within the group who has previously created these submission packages comes up with an idea to improve efficiency. The idea is a process that automates the creation of the electronic submission data package while also creating a file that provides the traceability between the files within the data package and the source files that were pulled together to create the package, such as the XPT datasets, define.xml, data reviewer's guide and TXT program files.

Unfortunately, it was not robust enough to consider all the possibilities that the stakeholders' teams faced, in this case the statistical programming leadership group. After consulting with each of the stakeholders and their lead programmers individually, the programmer learned more about the skepticism that individuals had, such as data packages prepared by external vendors that needed to go through internal checking. By soliciting for suggestions on process improvement from stakeholders, consensus was built, and the overall design evolved to address the concerns of each stakeholder.

In the end, the envisioned process had matured into something else. At its core, though, it was still based on the original idea, automating the creation of an electronic submission data package. The need for an automated, traceable process had been sold to the key stakeholders. And once all perspectives were considered and concerns were addressed, the statistical programming leadership group approved and authorized the creation of utilities to adopt the proposed process.

What are the defining attributes of a transformational leader?

It takes tenacity not to give up in the face of adversity and requires a growth mindset to learn from mistakes and always seek to improve. You must have empathy for others in order to understand their concerns. And once you understand their concerns, you must be willing to allow the original idea to evolve.

What are challenges to implementing this type of leadership?

Smaller organizations are usually working on finding a path forward (see trailblazing above), so this leadership style is most likely to be exhibited within an established organization. However, if the organization is resistant to change or unwilling to invest in innovation, it may be difficult to find support for transformational leadership to take place.

COMPARISON OF THE THREE LEADERSHIP STYLES

Table 2 summarizes the key elements from the discussion above.

	Trailblazing	**Servant**	**Transformational**
How to drive influence or make an impact	Indirect, first to find a way	Work with the team, not team working for you	Challenges the status quo
Relatable example	Small organization bringing studies in-house for the first time	Study lead listening to the team, working to remove roadblocks	Proposing and rolling out a new electronic data submission process
Defining attributes	Courageous, willingness to fail	Empathy, kindness	Tenacity, growth mindset
Main challenges to implementation	Few novel problems	Culture focused on individual performance	Resistance to change

Table 2. Comparison of the Trailblazing, Servant, and Transformational Leadership Styles

An individual can (and should) utilize different styles of leadership in depending on the situation or the individual. Few people exhibit only a single leadership style, although you may feel most comfortable defaulting to one of those described above.

For those in a smaller organization, trailblazing will most likely be used. In contrast, transformational leadership is suited for larger organization where a process already exists, but an idea for improvement is presented. This can also be one of the hardest types of leadership to employ as it is likely to face significant resistance from the decision-makers. Servant leadership can be exhibited anywhere but requires one to put themselves after the team. This can prove challenging in competitive organizations.

EFFECTIVE LEADERS ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

"Ninety percent of leadership is the ability to communicate something people want"
– Dianne Feinstein

A successful leader is an effective communicator, so it is worthwhile to spend a few moments discussing some ways to communicate well. The way a message is conveyed is often more important than the message itself. This section discusses strategies that can be employed to enhance communication. Adopting these can maintain or improve relationships, increasing the likelihood of achieving better outcomes.

Word choice is key in communication. Effective leaders chose their words carefully, mindful of how their words can be interpreted by the person with whom they are speaking.

Table 3 below presents some situations where the word choice can be altered to enhance communication.

	Situation	Instead of Saying…	Consider Saying…
1	You are asked to perform a task	I'm trying to do it.	I'm working on it.
2	A colleague thanks you for doing a task	No problem!	I'm happy to help!
3	Confirming the data cut logic by checking records that were cut out	Are you ok with these records being cut?	Are we ok with these records being cut?
4	A colleague contradicts you	No that's wrong, you misunderstood me.	Can you clarify what you mean by that?

Table 3. Situations with Word Choices Designed to Enhance Communication

The following discussion identifies potential issues with the original words chosen and how the proposed alternative shifts the meaning in subtle, yet important ways. Not mentioned, but equally important, is the tone used when delivering the message.

1. The word "trying" gives the perception that you may fail, whether this is true or not.

2. Even though "no problem" comes across as a positive response, the use of the word "problem" implies that there was some burden, but you are trying to spare the feelings of the requestor. Using a positive word, happy, within "I'm happy to help" suggests there was not an associated cost.

3. The use of "you" and "I" can dichotomize a team. Moreover, in this situation, asking someone else for their permission transfers responsibility to them, creating a hierarchy where they have authority over you. (In this case, the authority to approve the data cut logic.) Use grouping words such as "us", "we" and "ours" to give the perception of being in it together.

4. If a colleague contradicts you and you agree, then you can thank the person. Otherwise if you disagree, then challenge it by trying to improve your understanding of their perspective, which can be done by asking questions. By asking a question, you also show that you value their opinion. In contrast, the use of negative words such as "no" leads to both sides becoming defensive, at which point each side is waiting for a chance to respond and has stopped listening to what is being said.

Self-awareness is critical for a leader. Small changes in your daily interactions can have a profound effect on how you are perceived by others. That, in turn, is likely to increase their willingness to follow you.

LEADERSHIP PITFALLS

> *"Leaders aren't born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that's the price we'll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal."*
> *– Vince Lombardi*

Leadership takes work. Along the way, there will be ups and downs. It is inevitable to have some negative feelings along the way. Table 4 below identifies some leadership pitfalls and proposes tools for how to get back on track.

Pitfall		Tools	
Self-Doubt	If you do not really believe what you are saying, it will be more difficult to sound convincing	Self-Awareness	Learn and know yourself Recognize how you affect others
Insecurity	You end up spending more energy thinking and focusing on yourself instead of the team and collective goals	Self-Compassion	Forgive yourself for mistakes, as it will help you move forward when you fall
		Humility	Instead of focusing on what you did not know, shift your focus on what you can learn

Table 4. Leadership Pitfalls to watch out for and how to get back on track

Leadership pitfalls are natural and experiencing them is to be human. On the other hand, it takes work to be able to utilize leadership tools, which facilitate self-management. Learning self-management will enable leaders to become more effective.

CONCLUSION

Effective leaders recognize that their role exists to guide others. This ranges from a spectrum of telling others what to do to having others suggest what should be done. Leadership itself will take many forms, depending on the situation or people you find yourself with.

Disney's *Ratatouille* featured a renowned chef, Auguste Gusteau, who is known for the famous quote and book, "Anyone can cook". This serves to inspire the lead character, Remy, to become a chef. In a similar manner, this paper can be encompassed by the quote, "anyone can lead".

Leadership does not require one to be a people manager. Rather, leadership is the process of driving influence from others to achieve a goal. As this paper illustrates, anyone can be a leader. An individual contributor with an idea and a bit of courage can make an impact in an organization, both large and small. Importantly, there is not a singular type of leadership. Here, three different styles that do not require authority were explored in detail.

An effective leader is also an effective communicator. This paper presented some subtle, yet important ways that words can be chosen to enhance communication and improve one's leadership.

This has been a reflection paper based on the author's experiences. The examples and discussion herein may differ from the reader's own experiences. The author encourages the reader to share their own stories, especially those that differ from the ones presented within this paper.

> *"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do."*
> *– Eleanor Roosevelt*

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RECOMMENDED READING

- *Carnegie, D. (2017). How to win friends & influence people. e-artnow*

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