

Practical concept of leadership

Leadership has various meanings. Some might say that leadership is a hero figure, a savior with no hidden motives. While some might say that leadership is the innate quality of a person who can influence others. A more practical view of leadership is that leadership is fluid and that it depends on the context, place, and time that calls for a leader. Despite any context, key elements of leadership consist of goals and other people. Therefore, a more practical definition of leadership is the ability to influence a group of people towards the achievement of a set of goals. With this definition, it can be implied that there is three domain of leadership: task/goals, self, and others.

Managing tasks: How can I enable my team to reach success in any given task?

Leaders must ensure that tasks can be performed effectively. Effective teamwork requires 3 enabling drivers that leaders must provide: compelling direction, strong structure, and supportive context.

- Firstly, compelling direction lies in the goal that must be agreed among everyone in the team. The goal set by the leader needs to be clear, challenging, and consequential to the team. Leaders must balance the level of challenge and level of motivation.
- Secondly, leaders have to structure a strong team to tackle any given task. The team should consist of the right people in terms of skills, numbers, and diversity. By diversity, it means diverse background, capabilities, point of views, gender, thoughts, and many more. Each member should have a clear and independent role. Moreover, leaders must ensure that tasks are well designed to provide clear responsibility and the ability to provide feedback.
- Thirdly, leaders should be aware of what the team needs to succeed. The supportive context includes rewards, information, resources, and training. Without these three enabling drivers, Leaders can become less effective at managing tasks.

Managing self: How much am I in control of myself?

In 2010, Tony Hayward, a CEO of BP, came in front of a TV to address the oil spill incident caused by the company's operations in the Gulf of Mexico. His response was *"We're sorry for the massive disruption this has caused to their lives. There's no one wants this thing over more than I do. I'd like my life back."* The response caused so much chaos and negative publicity that he had to step down from his position as a CEO. Of course, it was not wrong for him to address the public with such a statement as he might be in a very intense level of stress. But that one statement alone, when it slipped, cost him his career. One might ask, is the statement *"...I'd like my life back"* expected from him by the public, by his shareholders, by his Board of directors? Would it turn out differently if he had shown remorse and offered to take full responsibility? This example emphasizes the very reason that leaders also need to consistently monitor and manage their *'self'*.

Managing and regulating oneself is the first step to becoming more effective at leadership. Leaders need to become aware of what part of themselves that they bring to work or to any given situation that might make them be the kind of person that people want to work for. Once they are aware, they need to be able to regulate and express the *'self'* that is suitable and conducive to the situation. Effective leaders are those who can control the leak of their emotions or actions despite the circumstances (or those who can avoid the Tony Hayward *"...I'd like my life back"* moment). To do this, leaders must accept that we, as human beings, can have different emotions and consistently explore what is going on inside ourselves. Only when we learn to explore and notice our emotions, then we can also choose to express what is suitable or what is *'expected of us'* in the situation. Reflecting on what Tony Hayward can do, possibilities vary: accepting the responsibilities and promise that he will quickly fix the problem, visit those who get affected and compensate for their loss, publicize a plan to tackle the issue, etc.

Self-management or self-regulation often seems hard for many leaders as years of experience may put pressure on them to always be right. However, leaders must equip themselves with the capacity to learn that there will always be the gap between an intended outcome and an actual outcome and that we, as leaders, can often be the cause of that gap. The best way to embrace self-regulation is through the practice mindfulness. Leaders can start by noticing their physical responses to the situation as emotions can affect our physical expressions i.e. we tightened our shoulders when we are put under pressure. Noticing these little physical giveaways can help us exercise control. Practicing and repeating this process can lead to success in self-management.

Managing others: How do you engage with others?

The reasons that people join any company usually vary. They either join because of the company's brand, prestige, or pay grade. However, the reason for leaving the company is, oftentimes, because of the relationship with managers. The quality of the relationship usually dictates the level of engagement of the employees. They might stay but feel disengaged or simply leave the company altogether. So the questions for leaders are where they are in the quadrant of task and relationship. Do they manage the task without any concern about the relationship aspect or the other way around? How can leaders balance the management of tasks and the relationship that they have with their subordinates?

Leaders should always reflect on how their management style impact other employees. It can be through upward feedback sessions or even surveys. Examples of what leaders should seek to find out the following:

- Do I find time to talk to my team about how they feel about their job/task?
- Does my team feel motivated after talking to me?
- Do they feel like the challenge I give them allow them to grow?
- Do they feel like I also want to listen to their opinion?
- Do I communicate in a helpful way when I am unhappy with their performance?

- Do I strike a good balance between support and challenge that I give to my team?
- Do they know that I am aware of their strengths and weaknesses?

Reflections on the points above can help leaders navigate through managing relationships with each team members more effectively.

Consider a leadership practice of Gwynne Shotwell a COO of SpaceX who has worked with Musk since the founding of the company. She has to manage 6,000+ employees and she is known for her ability to turn Musk's far-fetch goal into actionable and grounded tasks. She's the bridge between Musk and the staff. When Musk says 'Let's go to Mars' and She says 'OK, what do we need to actually get to Mars?' In her case, she believes in listening to others. She takes great effort to understand her team's concerns. Only when she is able to understand the problem well does she have the ability to clear the paths for her employees.

Apart from being a great listener, a leader has to also set a good example. When things get tough, it is important to put on a positive outlook. After Falcon 9 exploded during launch, Gwynne admitted that she "ran around with frowny face." However, she quickly realized that she needed to instill confidence among her team who most needed the inspiration from her. She said that "When I walked around with a worried face, it was not helpful to the company."

One's leadership practice is defined by the ability to balance and manage all 3 domains for leadership: task, self, and others. There is no success recipe or template for effective leadership as leadership is not one size fits all. One's leadership practice depends on the context as what works for you may not work for others. Therefore, it is up to leaders to reflect on the context as well as their management of task, self, and others. Reflections, then, can lead to the opportunity to learn and improve.

Experience is what sets us apart from others as leaders, but we must agree that experience is also a double-edged sword. Experience can also prevent us from accepting our flaws and from learning. The biggest question that we, as leaders, need to always ask ourselves is whether we are learners? Are we willing to learn how to improve ourselves, our relationship with others in the team, and how to provide proper support to ensure effectiveness? Without continuous reflections on these questions, we are falling behind from practicing effective leadership.