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What Is Leadership?



By the
Mind Tools
Editorial Team

Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right.

– Professor Warren G. Bennis

Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

The word "leadership" can bring to mind a variety of images. For example:

- A political leader, pursuing a passionate, personal cause.
- An explorer, cutting a path through the jungle for the rest of his group to follow.
- An executive, developing her company's strategy to beat the competition.

Leaders help themselves and others to do the right things. They set direction, build an inspiring vision, and create something new. Leadership is about mapping out where you need to go to "win" as a team or an organization; and it is dynamic, exciting, and inspiring.

Yet, while leaders set the direction, they must also use management skills to guide their people to the right destination, in a smooth and efficient way.

In this article, we'll focus on the process of leadership. In particular, we'll discuss the "transformational leadership" model, first proposed by James MacGregor Burns and then developed by Bernard Bass. This model highlights visionary thinking and bringing about change, instead of management processes that are designed to maintain and steadily improve current performance.

Note:

Leadership means different things to different people around the world, and different things in different situations. For example, it could relate to community leadership, religious leadership, political leadership, and leadership of campaigning groups.

This article focuses on the Western model of individual leadership, and discusses leadership in the workplace rather than in other areas.

Leadership: A Definition

According to the idea of **transformational leadership** ⁺, an effective leader is a person who does the following:

1. Creates an inspiring vision of the future.
2. Motivates and inspires people to engage with that vision.
3. Manages delivery of the vision.
4. Coaches and builds a team, so that it is more effective at achieving the vision.

Leadership brings together the skills needed to do these things. We'll look at each element in more detail.

1. Creating an Inspiring Vision of the Future

In business, a vision is a realistic, convincing and attractive depiction of where you want to be in the future. Vision provides direction, sets priorities, and provides a marker, so that you can

tell that you've achieved what you wanted to achieve.

To create a vision, leaders focus on an organization's **strengths** by using tools such as **Porter's Five Forces** +, **PEST Analysis** +, **USP Analysis** +, **Core Competence Analysis** + and **SWOT Analysis** + to analyze their current situation. They think about how their industry is likely to evolve, and how their competitors are likely to behave. They look at how they can **innovate successfully** +, and shape their businesses and their strategies to succeed in future marketplaces. And they test their visions with appropriate market research, and by assessing key risks using techniques such as **Scenario Analysis** +.

Therefore, leadership is proactive – problem solving, looking ahead, and not being satisfied with things as they are.

Once they have developed their visions, leaders must make them compelling and convincing. A **compelling vision** + is one that people can **see, feel, understand**, and **embrace**. Effective leaders provide a rich picture of what the future will look like when their visions have been realized. They **tell inspiring stories** +, and explain their visions in ways that everyone can relate to.

Here, leadership combines the analytical side of vision creation with the passion of shared values, creating something really meaningful to the people being led.

2. Motivating and Inspiring People

A compelling vision provides the foundation for leadership. But it's leaders' ability to motivate and inspire people that helps them deliver that vision.

For example, when you start a new project, you will probably have lots of enthusiasm for it, so it's often easy to win support for the project at the beginning. However, it can be difficult to find ways to keep your vision inspiring after the initial enthusiasm fades, especially if the team or organization needs to make significant changes in the way that they do things. Leaders recognize this, and they work hard throughout the project to connect their vision with people's individual needs, goals, and aspirations.

One of the key ways they do this is through **Expectancy Theory** +. Effective leaders link together two different expectations:

1. The expectation that hard work leads to good results.
2. The expectation that good results lead to attractive rewards or incentives.

This motivates people to work hard to achieve success, because they expect to enjoy rewards – both intrinsic and extrinsic – as a result.

Other approaches include restating the vision in terms of the benefits it will bring to the team's customers, and taking frequent opportunities to communicate the vision in an attractive and engaging way.

What's particularly helpful here is where leaders have **expert power** ⁺. People admire and believe in these leaders because they are expert in what they do. They have credibility, and they've earned the right to ask people to listen to them and follow them. This makes it much easier for these leaders to motivate and inspire the people they lead.

Leaders can also motivate and influence people through their natural charisma and appeal, and through other **sources of power** ⁺, such as the power to pay bonuses or assign tasks to people. However, good leaders don't rely too much on these types of power to motivate and inspire others.

3. Managing Delivery of the Vision

This is the area of leadership that relates to **management** ⁺.

Leaders must ensure that the work needed to deliver the vision is properly managed – either by themselves, or by a dedicated manager or team of managers to whom the leader delegates this responsibility – and they need to ensure that their vision is delivered successfully.


To do this, team members need performance goals that are linked to the team's overall vision. Our article on **Performance Management and KPIs** ⁺ (Key Performance Indicators) explains one way of doing this, and our **Project Management** section explains another. And, for day-to-day management of delivering the vision, the **Management By Wandering Around** ⁺ (MBWA) approach helps to ensure that what should happen, really happens.

Leaders also need to make sure they **manage change** ⁺ effectively. This helps to ensure that the changes needed to deliver the vision are implemented smoothly and thoroughly, with the support and backing of the people affected.

4. Coaching and Building a Team to Achieve the Vision

Individual and team development are important activities carried out by transformational leaders. To develop a team, leaders must first understand team dynamics. Several well-established and popular models describe this, such as **Belbin's Team Roles** ⁺ approach, and Bruce Tuckman's **Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing theory** ⁺.

A leader will then ensure that team members have the necessary skills and abilities to do their job and achieve the vision. They do this by **giving and receiving feedback** ⁺ regularly, and by **training and coaching** ⁺ people to improve individual and team performance.

Leadership also includes looking for **leadership potential**  in others. By developing leadership skills within your team, you create an environment where you can continue success in the long term. And that's a true measure of great leadership.

Note:

The words "leader" and "leadership" are often used incorrectly to describe people who are actually managing. These individuals may be highly skilled, good at their jobs, and valuable to their organizations – but that just makes them excellent managers, not leaders.

So, be careful how you use the terms, and don't assume that people with "leader" in their job titles, people who describe themselves as "leaders," or even groups called "leadership teams," are actually creating and delivering transformational change.

A particular danger in these situations is that people or organizations that are being managed by such an individual or group think they're being led; but they're not. There may actually be no leadership at all, with no one setting a vision and no one being inspired. This can cause serious problems in the long term.

Key Points

Leadership can be hard to define and it means different things to different people.

In the transformational leadership model, leaders set direction and help themselves and others to do the right thing to move forward. To do this they create an inspiring vision, and then motivate and inspire others to reach that vision. They also manage delivery of the vision, either directly or indirectly, and build and coach their teams to make them ever stronger.

Effective leadership is about all of this – and it's exciting to be part of this journey!

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