

## To affinity and beyond; Paradoxical Leadership

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Peter Drucker said: "Management is doing things right, leadership is doing the right things." Doing things right is easily measured. All you need to do is define criteria for efficiency, cost reduction, etc. and put a reward structure in place for meeting these criteria. Doing the right things is another matter entirely. There are no easily measurable criteria that I know of; the bottom line seems to be the only one in use. The quintessential question for leadership few managers ask themselves is: "What are the right things to do and am I doing them?" Answering this question and actually doing the right things is what sets leaders apart. The knack of knowing what things to do and acting upon this knowledge is not given to everybody.

There also is this other part to leadership. The decisions about what to do cannot be delegated; someone has to make them, on his/her own. If they are the right decisions: you are revered as a champion, if they are not, you are likely to fall hard. Either way you are in a very lonely position. There are plenty of choices about what to do in today's world, and the risks involved in actually choosing and acting upon the choices made are continuously increasing. That is why we have so very few leaders, not many men or women would take the burden of today's complex choices and increasing risks and bear them alone. Let us go back to management. There is an old saying: "If all you have is a hammer, all your problems become nails." Let me add: "If you are in a hole, stop digging!" Most managers today seem to combine the two and are only using shovels, so all their problems are converted to needing bigger holes. They are getting rewarded because they meet all criteria of good management, but they're not being judged on doing the right things. For the sake of space I will not go into examples. You know what I mean, and if you don't, just open any business oriented newspaper or magazine and look at the amount of money that is being rewarded for shoddy work. (Enron, Parmalat, Ahold come to mind). At some point in time digging is not the best thing to be doing, filling the hole might have been a better idea. We recently got a request for helping a department of a big consumer electronics firm to adapt its management style to what its employees expect, thereby empowering them and making optimal use of their unique talents and abilities. Different cultures were also part of the equation, but for the sake of convenience I will leave that part out of this picture. Most people associate management style with finding your affinity as a manager, bringing out the "you" in your behaviour as it were. They believe that congruent behaviour (authentic and predictable) will help you develop a style that is effective and suits both you and your employees. If style were such a simple thing as being friendly, being tough or being thoughtful, or any other one dimensional trait, there would be a point to all this albeit a very limited one. Consider this: all your employees want you to be friendly to them. They also want you to be tough on people who step out of line. Come to think of it all your employees want you to think things through, for them. Unfortunately life is not this simple, being everything at the same time to everybody is impossible. In our world the context changes continuously and so should the accompanying management style. Every context requires a different approach and so does every employee you have. The question is not whether your management style fits you, but whether it fits your context. Management style is not about you it is about how you respond to what is happening around you. Context is superior in the relation you have with it, reality drives all events, so don't let your ego get in the way. Now we come to the central point of this piece. To us Management style is context dependent and is about your ability to show the right style given the context you are in. Every individual has certain affinities, preferences for dealing with situations. Some managers like to control a situation whereas other managers would rather provide the freedom to act. These managers do see when a context is better dealt with through control or freedom, but under pressure they will act according to their affinities and go with what they feel instead of what they know they should be doing. The point is, that your natural affinities will make you effective in one situation, thereby successful, but those very same affinities might prove disastrous in another situation. If the context requires control and the person's first inclination is to give people freedom . . . Well you can paint the picture yourself. The wisdom in leadership is in understanding these two things: is your natural affinity ("style") effective for this context, and if not, can you produce the appropriate style or do you need someone else? Someone that is preferably already a member of your team! This is where Paradoxical leadership comes in, recognizing how to act given your context and who to put in charge given this context. As the manager of a team of people, you should always keep an eye out for people's egos taking on contexts that should be dealt with by those better equipped to deal with this context. That is why you need to know the affinities of the team of people you are leading and let them deal with contexts they have affinities for. Not only does this solve the "It's lonely at the top" aspect of leadership - you are delegating your leadership according to who is best suited to deal with the situation - it also solves the earlier mentioned department's empowerment issue and the use of its team's unique talents and abilities. Three flies in one stroke! Paradoxical leadership is about reflection on what is happening around you and acting accordingly, even if your actions seem to contradict earlier actions. This reflection is much easier if done with a diverse group of people, as is the subsequent delegation process of leadership. There are very few leaders who do the right thing in any context, because the individual that sees any context for what it is, is a very unique individual indeed. Under pressure we all revert to our natural affinity, which means that most people will use their hammer even when their problem is a hole. The solution in this case is very simple; build a team of people with different affinities that has the ability to choose and adapt as a whole! Let us take a start-up as an example. First you need the freedom to generate ideas, structure them into concepts, package them into products that you can sell, sell them and make money. Second, you need to put rational goals in place to grow your business. Third you need to set up internal processes to improve efficiency, control the flow of money and manage the risks. Fourth, if you grow big enough, you need to support your employees with career

opportunities, training, et cetera. The first is about freedom and focus on the market, the second is about control and focus on the market, the third is about control and internal focus and the fourth is about freedom and internal focus. The challenge is, that though these are phases, certainly by the time you reach the fourth they all happen at the same time. Paradoxical leadership is not only phase dependent, that would make it easy, it is about adapting to the challenges you meet when confronting them all at the same time. Back to the manager stuck in a hole. Why not help him gather teams around him with the ability to look at the same situation from different viewpoints, with different tools to adapt and in the process give him an opportunity to continuously adapt his leadership to the given context? In other words make a paradoxical leader out of him!