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BOOST YOUR TEAM WITH SWITCHING

How to encourage switching in your team

1. Understand the dynamics of switching. When someone steps up into a leading role they need others to step up into the following role also.
2. Recognise the source of power in leadership is influence, not formal authority. Ultimately, followers who decides who will be leaders.
3. Set the example by following others in your team at appropriate times. Make an active, positive contribution to the team, just as you would as a leader. The only difference is someone else has stepped up into a leading role!
4. Encourage team members to step up and initiate action or take charge of particular activities. This is especially important in areas of competence, since perceived expertise is a powerful influencing factor within teams.
5. Avoid the urge to contrive team dynamics to allow everyone equal airtime in leading roles. That's just not the best use of team resources. Some people will step up more often than others and for longer. Nevertheless, recognise that, over time and in different contexts, it is likely that all team members will find at least a moment where they can step up into a leading role.

"Occupy Wall Street"

It started with a call, on 17 September 2011, to "Occupy Wall Street". A news report described those first 1000 protesters as, "a leaderless and trenchantly democratic mob". A video news items on 8th October noted, "the three-week-old campout in a lower Manhattan plaza is an increasingly well-organized jumble of people". By October 13, the media description had become, "they have food supplies, a medical team, computer technicians and even a solar panel for renewable energy".

Regardless of your opinions about their cause, you'll no doubt agree that the level of organisation is pretty remarkable. Thanks to its live daily video stream and use of social media devices and tools, the press labelled the occupation site a "high tech-village". But, we should add, it's no 5 star resort. Local laws prohibit tents, so people sleep in the open. The only toilets are those in nearby restaurants.

No leaders, no leadership?

So is it possible that this level of organisation can come about without leaders? One of the protesters, Rick DeVoe, is quoted as saying, "We are leaderless. We are self-organizing". This perception likely arises from his commitment to the cause. The protesters despise the single 'leaders' who, in the protesters' opinion, abuse inordinate corporate power. Using the term 'leader' becomes an anathema for people like DeVoe.

By labelling the protest as leaderless, the reporter applied similar perceptual filters, but in a slightly different way. He was unable to see any identifiable leader, so assumed there were no leaders at all. Again, we ask, "Is it possible to initiate, build and sustain this level of organisation without leaders?"

It is absolutely feasible that remarkable organisation can occur without a sole leader ('the leader') being identified. But, folklore of most cultures abounds with tales of heroes and heroic deeds. Leadership research also has focussed mostly on the single-leader, in part because it's a less complex research challenge than multiple-leader scenarios. Like many, the reporter believes that if one leader is not apparent then there is no leader.

However, a common definition of leadership is, "influencing others towards a common goal". The vital outcome is that others are influenced and follow. At the time that happens, then the person exercising influence (leadership) must be leading. This is not a semantic debate. It's an appeal for a critical shift of perception, away from the single-leader myth. Such an understanding would not only be liberating for protester DeVoe, but also increase the chance of even more leadership being exercised by others. This is the source of great power in teams.

How do people exercise leadership?

Have you ever stopped to think how anyone actually exercises leadership? You may read about the type of behaviours used in leading, like the eight influencing behaviours that UGM research has identified and discussed previously. The question though is how do those behaviours become influential? Our research also shows that different people lead and follow through 'switching'.

Think of the first telephone exchanges where operators physically connected callers. A caller signalled they were on the line and the operator switched their call through to the person they wanted to reach. When the call was over, the connection was terminated as the operator switched the lines to a not-connected state.

Shared leadership (and following for that matter) works in a similar way. Team members step up to leading roles by initiating behaviour or taking charge of it. For example, a team member might initiate communication in the team. If others are influenced by the action, they will follow. Their response might be to contribute to the exchange that occurs as a result. It's possible that another team member will step up and take charge of keeping the communicating exchange alive, until its purpose is achieved.

Stepping up, stepping back and stepping down

Here's how switching works in teams. Having successfully initiated the communication by *stepping up* to the task, there are four possible next moves for that member. The member can step up again, with another, complementary influencing behaviour. And it can be simultaneous – we often have multiple people in teams contributing complementary leadership behaviours at the same time.

A second choice is for that member to *step back* from a leading role and step up to a following role. Now, the team member is being influenced by the second member who is leading. Bear in mind that if no one followed the second member then their behaviour would not result in leadership.

Third, the first member might not willingly give up leadership and a 'leadership struggle' will occur as member two continues to try and influence the team. Good sense may prevail and one of them might step back. However, what often happens in leadership duels for sole leadership is that there is a winner and loser. In defeat, the loser then *steps down*.

Note how stepping up and stepping back is void of assumptions about superiority and dominance. However, when there is a grab for power, then it becomes a hierarchical issue. The loser steps down or, if unwillingly to follow, *steps out*. This results in capacity loss for the team.